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ARROSE

by

Gordon Arthur Smith

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MASCAROSE

PROPERTY
OF THE

"Can you not save your dreaming for the night?" she demanded; "the day was made for realities."

[*Page* 62]

MASCAROSE

BY

GORDON ARTHUR SMITH

"Much hate I

CHARLES SCRIBNER
NEW YORK

[illegible] day [illegible]

MASCAROSE

BY

GORDON ARTHUR SMITH

"Much have I marvelled at a song."
Bertolome Çorgi.

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS
NEW YORK:::::::::::::::::::: 1913

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MASCAROSE

MASCAROSE

I

THOU SHALT HAVE A HERO AND A HEROINE

A BREEZE sprang up, tearing a few tattered clouds from the east, and forthwith the sun rode out over the hills to usher in a new day. Under a greening oak, beside the bridle-path that led to Gavarret, lay Aimar of Blaye asleep, with no blanket save his cloak and no bed save the dew-scented grass. As the sunlight struck him full in the face he stirred, and then he sighed, and then he smiled, and the smile persisted, for his waking thoughts were pleasant.

Drawing in his long legs, he rose to his feet, displaying a pleasing figure of a man

— of a man who was scarcely not a boy. He was slim and lithe and wore no beard, and his eyes were those that, having gazed on the past for but a short while, look eagerly to the future for fulfilment. His hair, which was the color of wheat in the sun, he wore too closely cropped for a poet and too long for a warrior. His hands, however, bespoke the lute rather than the spear — hands made for the plucking of strings, the penning of verse, and the praying for grace immortal or mortal.

Suddenly, ceasing to smile, he drew in his belt and knelt on the ground.

"Twelve hundred years ago," he cried, "our Blessed Redeemer was buried and rose again! Am I a Christian and a troubadour and not sing it?"

Whereupon, still on his knees, he thought for a while and then opened his mouth and sang of Christ and of love; for to him Christ and love were one. His voice was not strong, neither was it frail,

but it held the crystal of innocence and the silver of youth. Thus, his matins accomplished and his soul satisfied, he proceeded to satisfy his body with some bread which he had in his cloak, and some blue grapes which he plucked from a vine.

By now the sun was well up in the sky, and the tree shadows were growing shorter on the grass. He turned to the south and set out briskly, with his chin high and his lips slightly parted, as though eager to breathe in all of the cool freshness of the morning.

"I shall reach the castle by noon," he said, "for hope will shorten the road."

Forthwith he started singing again. All of his songs were of love, and all of them were gay; and this was not strange, for he had yet to love.

The road stretched before him like a chalk line drawn by an uncertain hand. Yellow wheat, not yet at its full, edged its swaying, rippling mass close to him on

left and right; and, where the wheat was not, there was delicious expanse of grass, purpled with heather and sweetened by wild roses.

"It is as bright," thought Aimar, "as a lady's eyes, and as fragrant as her hair."

Then he sat down behind a hawthorn-hedge and, since he was hungry, finished what was left of his bread, loosened his belt, stretched his length on the ground, and closed his eyes that he might the better contemplate his thoughts.

Down the road from Gavarret came a young girl and an old man. She was laughing and jesting, and every little while she would run to one side of the road and pluck a rose which she would weave with its mates into a wreath. And her lips were redder than the roses. Her hair was black, but with that shimmer of light in it that you see in still water at night, and it lay unbound to her knees. Her brown eyes seemed uncommonly large in the

thin white oval of her face — eyes that saw the world, yet understood it not; eyes that waited to be wakened, calm with the innocence of ignorance, fearless as those of the unhunted deer. A Daphne kneeling in the rushes by some forest pool might have seen just such eyes as those. But enough of her eyes.

As the two approached the hawthorn-hedge behind which, lulled by the humming of tiger-colored bees, Aimar of Blaye lay dreaming, the old man fell several paces behind, for he walked with difficulty, and depended as much on his rough oaken stick as on his own two quaking legs. Thus it fell out that the girl reached the hedge long before him and, seeking a rose, found Aimar. She started back in fright, hesitated, cast him another look over her shoulder, and stopped. Then she stepped through the hedge cautiously, that she might not disturb him, and kneeling by his side regarded him gravely, with the interest one might bestow on a carved

saint in the portal of Chartres. She leaned so near that he felt her breath on his cheek, and he opened his eyes.

"You are very beautiful," he murmured.

"Yes," she agreed, "I am."

Thinking that he still dreamed, he clung to his dream.

"Your voice is like the sweetest note of the lute plucked by a master's hand."

"What is a lute?" asked she.

That awakened him; but as he half rose she motioned him back.

"You would better sleep again," she said, "for I must leave you. Do you hear? That is my father's voice. He is calling for me; I was looking for roses and —"

"You found a sorry rose," sighed Aimar, worshipping her eyes with his.

"Do you mean yourself?" she asked gravely. "I think you are handsome. What is your name?"

"They call me Aimar," he answered; "and you?"

"They call me Mascarose," she said, and fled from him; and she wondered why her cheeks were burning.

"Mascarose," repeated Aimar to himself, "Mascarose! Was there ever so delicious a name? She has come and she has gone like the fragrance borne to one on some fleeting wind, sweet with the roses of the south. Ah, elusive, fugitive vision! Would that I might dream again to regain thee, or that waking I might have clasped thee!"

Thus he raved and, as is the way of poets, the more he listened to his own words the more wonderful did her presence become, and the more lamentable her absence.

Something within him warned him not to attempt to follow her. Some sense of the fitness of things, no doubt; some respect for the transiency of visions. When at length he rose to his feet, both she and the white-bearded man, her father, had disappeared behind a turn in the road and

were hidden from his sight by a file of quivering poplars.

"*Sic transit gloria mundi!*" he whispered, and went on his way with a smile and a sigh.

II

THE HERO SHALL PROVE HIMSELF WORTHY

AND now as he approached Gavarret there passed many travellers, some on foot like himself, others prodding laggard mules or scourging patient, mouse-colored donkeys that staggered under sheaves of golden wheat. Once a score of armored knights flashed by him with much clanking of trappings and nodding of plumes, and the ground beneath his feet rocked with the beat of their horses' hoofs. That fired his blood; steel ringing against steel, and iron against stone. So he stood erect by the roadside watching them swing by, his eyes filled with dust and with something akin to tears; and, as soon as the lump left his throat, he sang of Palestine and the Crusaders and the wounded body

of our Lord. Had a Saracen been near it would have gone ill with the Saracen.

But his thoughts soon returned from the hoarse cries of war to the gentle whispers of love, for his was a mind from which love could never long be absent; and yet had you asked him that day to define love, I doubt if he could have formulated a reply. To him, who had seen less than a score of years, love was more of an aspiration than a consummation. It was like unto prayer. In his heart its symbol had been a lily rather than a crimson rose. But hold! Rose!

"Mascarose!" he murmured, and forthwith cast out the lily.

At that moment, breasting an incline, he saw ahead and somewhat below him the pink roofs of Gavarret, clustering like frightened doves about the sturdy, square-topped Romanesque towers of a church. Carefully terraced vineyards paralleled along the slope of the hill to right and left, downward to the very gates of the

town; and opposite, on the far side of the valley, the castle of Gavarret, high on a frowning cliff, pierced deep into the sky-line with its jagged turrets and spires. This was his journey's end.

His pulses quickened as he realized that he was looking upon that which promised to play a great part in his future. Those gray walls held his fate in the balance. Once more that day he dropped to his knees and, removing his hood and his close-fitting cap, prayed to the Holy Virgin to be with him, that she might stretch out her saving hand to help one who was young and ignorant of the way of the world, but who sang from a pure heart and who glorified God both morning and evening. And, the better to prove it, he concluded with a *Te Deum Laudamus.*

With resolute step he turned and put the road behind him so briskly that in half an hour he was in the town. There he inquired his way of a crone, bearded and bent at right angles, and was directed by

her palsied finger to the Inn of the Golden Cross.

It was a rude place and at its rudest at this, the noon hour. Beefy men-at-arms elbowed each other and smote mighty blows on the table with gauntleted fists — a tournament of noise; and a pair of black-eyed, apple-cheeked girls, in no whit dismayed, spurred them on to greater bedlam. The room reeked of leather and sour wine.

Aimar put his weight against the heavy door, swinging it inward, and, stepping across the threshold, stood erect, half smiling, half defiant. There followed an instant's lull while all turned to face him. And then some one, either bolder than his mates or more drunken or nearer the back of the room, called out lustily: "Hail, peacock! Pride of Provence!"

"The comparison," said Aimar quietly, "does not hold. If you had wits you would know that the peacock cannot sing. I can."

The retort, such as it was, was greeted on some sides with applause, on others with jeers; but it was noted that whence the jeering proceeded there followed vigorous slaps of open palms on bearded cheeks. The two black-eyed wenches, approving, were exerting their powers to convert all heretics to their persuasion. At length, when silence was partially accomplished, one of them, the prettier, shrilled out: "Mount the table, boy! These swine would strangle a nightingale."

So Aimar, with hammering heart, leaped to a chair and thence to a table, and, standing in the midst of wine-jugs broken and whole, he unslung his lute and commenced.

Some patron saint of his must have whispered to him that it is better to sing to soldiers of love than of war. Otherwise he might have begun with the very song that he had composed on the road — the one of Palestine and the crusade — and have been jeered for his pains. But, as it

happened, every verse that he had written flew from his brain like clouds from a north wind, and so, his mind betraying him, he called on his heart.

He sang of a lady — a lady with hair like the night — with hair like a black cloud at night with the moon shining through it — a lady dressed in white with a girdle as red as a crimson rose — with a girdle as red as her lips — and in her eyes love lay asleep — asleep but ready to be wakened — and her breath was as sweet as a garden of roses. Ah — as a garden of roses!

Here he paused amidst an ardent silence, caressing the strings plaintively. Why should he sing so much of roses? It was poor craftsmanship, this use of a simile twice. And then his heart gave a little throb of pleasure, and with racing pulses he sang that his lady had come to him as he lay dreaming — that he had tried to clasp his dream — but that dreams die like roses — that everything dies but love

— that everything in this world must die — but not his love for his lady — his exquisite Lady of Roses.

He stopped short and looked down at the faces about him. The two black-eyed wenches were sobbing ecstatically, and more than one man-at-arms was wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. Perhaps it was the thought of love unrequited until death that appalled them; but those were the days when men went weeping into battle, and tears were as honorable as prayers.

And then nothing would do but that Aimar should seat himself, and everything in the house was his for the asking. The two girls, deserting Mars for Apollo, sat beside him and admired the cut of his cloak, the silk of his hose, and the whiteness of his hands. The men, putting aside any jealousy, slapped him on the back and swore he was a fine fellow. So all went merrily.

But Aimar had come to the Golden Cross

neither to sample wine and venison, nor yet to sing to weeping wenches and swearing soldiers. He sought other quarry, and when the first occasion offered he swooped and struck. One of the girls, who went by the name of Guida, having found him indifferent to her endearments, commenced to question him closely.

"Whence do you come, my sweet?" she asked, her fingers in his hair.

"From Anduze," said he, moving his head away gently.

"And are you for the castle?"

"Where else?" he retorted. And then, for here was his occasion, he struck in boldly:

"Know you what manner of woman is the Countess Alazais? I hear many reports. Some would make her a saint — others a serpent."

"Ho!" cried Guida, opening her wide mouth in disparagement. "So the wind lies in that quarter. He would sing to Alazais. Hope of heaven, boy, do you

care for your skin? If you do, have but one eye for the Countess and the other, the better one, for her husband, Peire of Gavarret. The Countess, it is said, cuts with words: the Count with steel. She will break your heart while he is breaking your back. The choice lies between a whole heart and a whole back, or a broken heart and a broken back. Now, go play the fool and make eyes at her."

She gave him a shove that brought him to his feet standing, kissed him soundly and noisily on the mouth, and began to weep. Did she love him? I know not; but white flowers sometimes grow in mire.

Aimar, ill at ease, regarded her, sighed, reflected that women were strange creatures, and slipped out of the Inn of the Golden Cross as discreetly as he was able.

III

THERE SHALL BE A BEARDED VILLAIN

IN great haste Aimar shook the dust of the village from his feet; and yet his encounter at the inn should have added to his self-confidence. His voice had served him well when he had called upon it; it swayed when he would have had it sway; it won all it advantaged him to have it win. He was assured now of a weapon far more potent than the ornamental dagger at his belt.

There was but one road to the castle of Gavarret, and that lay before him, white and unmistakable; a sinuous road turning abruptly on itself as it toiled up the cliff, of which Gavarret was the crown. At times, pausing for breath, Aimar looked up and marked the castle's stern aspect; its

heavy ominous walls, its significant battlements, its narrow, deep-set windows.

"It frowns overmuch for my liking," he said; "it shall be my business to make it smile."

A booted guardsman answered his "hallo" at the outer gate.

"What want you at Gavarret, chicken?" he demanded.

"Entrance!" replied Aimar briefly.

"For what purpose?" the other pursued.

"To employ the voice the Lord has given me, and the lute I have gotten for myself."

The soldier deigned to laugh.

"You can do little harm and doubtless less good," he said, and opened the gate; and as Aimar passed through he flung after him: "You are the one beardless male that Gavarret has seen in many a month. May the saints have mercy on your soul!"

"I fear not for my soul," said Aimar.

"Then look to your body," the other achieved.

If the outward aspect of Gavarret was uninviting (I mean the front that faced the town of Gavarret and an imaginary foe), the back did brighter homage to the blue skies and blue eyes of cheery Provence. There Aimar beheld doors that were not gates and towers that were not prisons. And there, too, were casements suited to the framing of a lady's golden head; casements from which her round, white arm might flash to drop a saffron ribbon or a fragrant glove, or perchance — thought Aimar — perchance a crimson rose.

Immediately beneath these windows stretched a parapet-hemmed terrace clear from end to end — a delicious expanse where lovers might pace hand in hand, whispering the nothings that to them are everythings; where they might rest on marble benches and gaze over the balustrade down onto the garden that glowed beneath them with masses of green and

hints of purple and scarlet, of lemon-yellow and of hawthorn-pink; and where, gazing, arms might girdle slim waists and lips find better employ than speech.

The terrace walk, however, as Aimar saw it, contained nothing more amorous than a pair of fan-tail peacocks that advanced and retreated with strange, hoarse mutterings — haughty fools spoiled by overmuch admiration. So Aimar stayed not to conciliate them.

Descending a flight of stone steps, he reached the level of the garden, where a path led him between yew-hedges out to an open stretch of velvet grass. His guide was the sound of laughter, loud but mirthless, laughter such as greets the jest of a king. When he had reached the end of the path, which was marked by two green-black cypresses, he came so suddenly upon the company that, for an instant confused, he stepped back into the shadow of one of the trees. From his vantage-point, seeing, yet not seen, his eyes drank their fill.

At a long table, spread with a rich scarlet cloth and gay with silver dishes and the wanton hue of southern fruit, was seated a company of six. "Three ladies, two men, and a monk," remarked Aimar; but he was to find that monk very much a man.

In the centre sat he whom Aimar set down instantly for Peire of Gavarret. A dark man, bearded to his eyes, and they gleaming viciously like angry coals. He was sullen, and his mood tainted whatever merriment the others might have indulged in, although, to be sure, they laughed loudly enough whenever he descended to jesting. The Monk, merry-faced and corpulent, as became a monk in those days, was the only one whom Gavarret could not depress. In that he conducted himself after the manner of one who knows that he is privileged: he laughed when Gavarret scowled and he scowled when Gavarret laughed; he ate freely enough and he drank too freely. The third male of the company

said nothing and ate as much. So Aimar put him down as being love-sick.

Opposite Gavarret, Aimar marked her who must have been the Countess Alazais, and it was on her face that his eyes lingered the longest. He knew well enough that his fate lay in the hollow of her small, white hand; he knew that it was she whom he should have to propitiate — that it was her golden hair and her cold blue eyes and her half-petulant, half-disdainful lips he should have to sing.

"It will be cold work," he said, and shivered a little.

For the rest of the ladies (although one was regal and ugly and the other menial and comely) he had no eyes; but he studied Alazais to see if he might surprise in her some trace of emotion that went deeper than the skin, some flicker of the eyelid, some eager parting of the lips, some unconscious smile, some fugitive sigh. In this he was disappointed totally.

At length, perceiving he was but wasting

his time, he gathered his courage, stepped out from behind the cypress, threw back his hood, and bowed low, first to Alazais, then to her lord, the Count Peire of Gavarret.

"My lord and my lady," he began, "your fame, travelling far, overtook me at Anduze. Glorious are the reports of the prowess of my lord and the beauty and virtue of my lady. Have I been over-presuming to address myself to you and to seek the entertainment and the hospitality of Gavarret until such time as my voice shall cease to please and my songs be tuneless?"

"Now," said the Monk, delighted, "the saints are propitious. We have had no songs here but those of the nightingales, and they themselves are so depressed they sing in whispers. My lord Count, will you not make this boy welcome? My lady, think you not your charms would be better praised in his verse than in our poor prose, for even my Latin is thin and pallid and unequal to your beauty."

"Peace," said the Count; "you would be a greater glory to God's name on earth if you prayed more and talked less."

"If I talked less," replied the Monk, "there would be no sound at Gavarret."

Alazais, who had been regarding Aimar steadily, neither with favor nor disfavor, now raised her chin from her two palms and asked his name. Aimar told her.

"Then, Aimar," she said, "you may sing, and if you please us you may stay. Have I reason, my lord?" and she turned to Gavarret as though she cared not for his approval or disapproval, but was aware that his "yes" was a necessity to any contract.

"As you will," said Gavarret carelessly. "For me, I care not much for boys that are beardless —"

"Or for women that are bearded," the Monk finished for him, rejoiced at his own wit.

Aimar waited not for more, but, touching softly the strings of his lute, sang first of a

garden where there grew but few flowers and where there was no joy because there was no song. The lily could not voice her purity nor the violet her modesty, nor the corn-flower his courage nor the rose her passion; and so pitiable were they that every morning the dew came to weep over them. Then there flew a nightingale into their midst and sang for them and of them, and love being his theme the flowers took new heart, and where there had been few there now blossomed many.

"Which proves, my lady," concluded Aimar, "that there can be no joy where there is no love and no song."

The silence that followed proclaimed that the troubadour had driven his shaft to the mark. Then they clapped, but all of them warily save for the Monk, who laughed long and loud and slapped the table with his silver goblet.

"Well sung!" he cried, "and the parable is lucid and unmistakable. As to its truth there is no one can deny it. My lord

Gavarret, permit this nightingale to stay and sing in our garden, and by our Lady there will be roses blooming in many a cheek; and where there has grown but one little Gavarret (and he still in the cradle), perchance there will be many." And he laughed, but Alazais bit her lip in annoyance.

The Count, however, seemed not ill-pleased, and, remarking that a throat such as that could not be spoiled by good wine, he commanded a servant to set a place for the troubadour at the table. When Aimar had seated himself the ugly old lady smiled at him, and the comely young one could not keep her eyes from him, and the love-sick youth broke his silence by choking on a radish through envy of him, and the Countess Alazais idly cast him a look from time to time over her grapes that might have meant little or that might have meant more.

Thus was Aimar made welcome at Gavarret.

IV

THERE SHALL BE A WORTHY MONK

THAT evening the Monk and Aimar held long converse, the Monk seeking him in his room after the castle had retired for the night. Aimar, not unwilling to talk, and perceiving that silence was one virtue his visitor did not possess, made him as welcome as might be. And first he thanked him for having been his friend that afternoon in the garden.

"Nonsense," said the Monk; "a cheerful man like me wearies of seeing naught but long faces about him. I come from the very south, from Béziers, and am more scholar than monk. I know a great deal, but I didn't know enough not to shave my head and take to skirts; and once a monk always a monk. Howsoever, I do not meddle in the spiritual welfare of this

castle of Gavarret, for, to begin with, the Count has no soul to save, and his lady no opportunity for sinning. Then, to be sure, there is the ancient Lady Guillerma, she of the toothless smile who yet persists in smiling. Well, her I leave to the priest who celebrates High Mass every Lord's day and every saint's day besides. Guillerma, you must know, is the mother of our icy Alazais, and the haughty sister of a prince — I forget what prince, but she will not fail to inform you herself. Also she is the shame-faced aunt of the comely little sprig who worshipped you continuously with two very wet, black eyes to-day in the garden. The comely little sprig has neither father nor mother, the mother being dead and the father unknown; and her they call Ermengarda and browbeat and render as wretched as is possible. Her poor little fluttering soul, I make bold to say, will be one of the few that are chosen of the many that are called to the great accounting."

"Doubtless," said Aimar; "for our Blessed Lady is compassionate, and then there will be the Madeleine to intercede for her besides. But tell me something of Gavarret himself. You said only that he had no soul to save."

"Gavarret," said the Monk of Béziers, slowly, "is a hawk; you must learn him for yourself, though. Methinks he would not be so sullen and lowering were his wife not so handsome; and were his wife not so handsome, he would not love her as he does; and did he not love her as he does he would not be so jealous; and were he not so jealous — why there you are — he would not be so sullen and lowering. I have given you a domestic tragedy in a single sentence."

"You have also given me matter for pondering," said Aimar. "I am still very young, and God has fashioned so many varieties of man that every new one is a new puzzle. Does God never make two alike?"

"Men, yes," answered the Monk; "women, no. A man, now, is white or he is black. But the women — may heaven bless them — are so elusive that it will be hard to prove any of them sinners even on the day of judgment. All of the doves will be white."

With this final tribute, the Monk remarked that the night was advanced, and Aimar, spent from a day that racked body, mind, and heart, did not urge him to stay. So he girded up his brown skirts, collected his feet beneath him, rose to them, and set them moving toward the door.

"I may be in error," he said, pausing at this point, "but as sure as the earth is flat I believe that the Countess Alazais loves you better than many that have been at the castle longer." After that he reached the corridor and his brown bulk was lost to view; but he thrust his round countenance back into the doorway and said: "And the Countess Alazais is not the woman to trade her heart for a mere song."

Whereupon he emitted some cheerful, guttural noise, doubtless meant for a laugh, and retired to prayer, meditation, and sleep.

Aimar undressed quickly, threw himself on the couch, and he too slept; and into the fabric of his dreams was woven a thread of roses. Once he smiled and his lips moved softly, and the word they framed was not Alazais but — Mascarose.

We are not surprised, for in those days the doors to hearts were left ajar, and love entered more easily and more naturally than now; and once enthroned in a heart it tyrannized, twining itself vine-like about the soul until it controlled the body. It lured battling knights from the fierce joy of killing back to their pavilions and their ladies' tender eyes. It was at once an inspiration and an opiate, raising men to godhood and reducing them to cravens. Often it was born in the morning of a smile, only to die in the tears of an evening. Ah, Dark Ages, wonderfully bright! Were

not your hearts more strong, your eyes more true, and your prayers more pure?

We leave the question unanswered, for the creaking of a door shatters the night silence, hinting that some one is astir in the castle.

She whom they called Ermengarda, the brow-beaten girl for whose soul the Monk of Béziers had prophesied eternal salvation, had lain mouse-like in her narrow tower room waiting in vain for sleep to come to her.

"But perchance," said she at length, touching the rough wall with her outstretched hand, "perchance there is not space enough here for both sleep and me."

So she tucked her two little bare feet into her slippers, flung her cloak over her thin shoulders, seized her candle, and, exerting all of her slim body in the effort, flung open the heavy door. The flame of her candle streamed back like a pennant at the prow of a ship, but she shielded it with her hand, and by degrees it steadied

itself. Reaching the tower stair, she descended slowly, each step an achievement. The draught played havoc with her mantle, and the gargoyles on the landings grinned fiendishly at the sight of her white ankles. So she hated the gargoyles.

At the foot of the staircase she paused to leave her candle in the shelter of the wall, and then, unlighted, went softly out to the terrace.

The open night air was fresh and cool as the brow of a sleeping child; but her mantle was edged about the neck with fur, so she snuggled her chin into its comfort and let its softness touch her lips.

Then, with the million stars in her eyes, she breathed the words that are of all time:

"I wonder if he loves me."

"Can you doubt it?" whispered a voice at her side.

"Savaric!" she cried, and her hand flew to her breast. It was the love-sick youth whom Aimar had noted in the garden.

"Ermengarda," said he, his voice atremble.

"You heard me?"

"I followed you," he replied; "pray God I may do so forever!"

Her cheeks were flaming, but I doubt if it was from anger.

"I couldn't sleep," he went on; "the air of the castle stifled me. I looked through my window and saw all the stars, and thought you might see them too; so I blessed the stars."

"How beautifully you speak!" she murmured. "You have never spoken like that before."

"'Tis the song of Aimar that has quickened my blood," he answered. "Do you remember the corn-flower that could not voice his courage?"

"And the violet that could not voice her modesty?" she sighed, and she hastened to cover her ankles.

"And the rose that could not voice her passion?" he said, looking her full in the eyes.

"Nor the lily her purity?" she quavered faintly.

But he took her in his arms, and she clung to his neck, half sobbing, wholly content.

And Aimar, unconscious of the havoc he had wrought, slept on, dreaming of roses.

V

THE HERO SHALL BE HONORED BY A GREAT LADY

HE awoke, blinking in the merry sunlight that came lilting in through the casement to make six yellow, restless squares on the floor. Hospitably enough, he had been given an outlook on the terrace walk, so that from his windows he could see the garden beyond, with its yews and cypresses and its patchwork of color; and over to the right a quiet turquoise pool, marble-lined and flecked with lilies.

The sun was not so high as to have robbed the morning of its hint of dew, and, indeed, in the low levels of the valley, below the plateau on which Gavarret perched, veils of mist clung and sifted and curled, reluctant to be off.

In the garden-path an old man was trim-

ming the yews, and so still was the air that Aimar could hear the soft cracking of severed twigs and the moist swish of the cool leaves. The bees were busy among the roses of the parapet, and far down in the garden birds were singing in the cypresses.

"Blessed be He who made the morning and the sun, and France for the sun to shine upon," cried Aimar, and started dressing himself as neatly as he could in his travel-stained clothes.

He had made but little progress when there came a knocking at the door, and a youthful page — a mere sketch of a boy — edged his way into the room. Over his arm lay a pile of garments, all scarlet and gold.

"What now, sir Troubadour," he demanded impudently, "think you to wear those rags again to-day? They are more suited to a jongleur performing in a tavern than to the official song-maker of the castle of Gavarret. Come, get your precious body into this robe and draw up

these hose on your maidenly limbs. And, behold, here are breeches for modesty's sake and a mantle for beauty's. All of this from my lady, the Countess Alazais, who hopes you have slept well and are in good voice; and if you should not be — why, mercy of God — you will be stripped as naked as the day your mother first saw you; for, whereas my lady Alazais is generous with gifts, my lord Gavarret is equally generous with blows. So, see to it that you put the lark to shame."

Aimar regarded the diminutive page with some amusement.

"Little flea," he said, "your tongue wags long for so short a body."

"My body," retorted the other, "will grow longer with my years. It is small, I grant you, but its proportions are good," and he turned toward Aimar his grinning imp of a face — snub-nosed, wide-mouthed, and flanked by huge ears like sails.

"What excellent ears to box," approved Aimar, unbuckling himself out of his belt.

"So thinks our Alazais — she of the lily hands. Methinks she vents on me the wrath she would bestow on her lord Gavarret did she dare. I have seen her fingers fairly itch for his beard; and then she summons me. 'Come hither, Ugo,' she says in her honey voice; 'your ears flap overmuch,' and, smack! — she applies the one remedy she knows. And then, when her lord looks not, she gives me a piece of gold or a jewelled dagger or a ring. Females, you see, are all alike; they want humoring. Why, look you, there 's my mare —"

"Peace!" cried Aimar, "or you will rouse the castle."

"Ah!" said Ugo, "I had forgotten. 'Tis that I was sent to tell you. The castle is already roused, for at sunrise there came riding a messenger up to the outer gate who blew such hell-rocking sounds on his trumpet that the whole guard turned out. It transpired that he was from no less a person than Marlatz,

Baron of Arc. The genial Marlatz, it seems, is on his way to grace this castle with his presence; for he is much given to travelling, and once every spring he stops at Gavarret to vex my lord and to flatter my lady. However that may be, there is much stir in the castle, which, had you not been dreaming, you would doubtless have heard. My lord Peire is mustering all the men-at-arms in Gavarret, and you may be sure that when he calls there are many to answer. Knights and squires and captains and serfs are flowing like the Rhone up to the outer gate, all in their gayest plumage; and in the hall there are a score of ladies smoothing their frocks and adjusting their wimples, so that they hide not their bright eyes; for Marlatz travels ever with a royal company, and his knights are as ardent as they are handsome. But Gavarret, loath to be outdone, is providing a reception worthy the guest."

"'Tis a friendly visit then?" asked Aimar.

"On the part of Marlatz 'tis friendly," replied Ugo. "When the wolf contemplates the sheep he can well afford to be friendly. It is the sheep that frets."

By now Aimar had buckled the last buckle and tied the last knot of his attire.

"I am for the hall," he said, "and then for the gate. Do you follow?"

"Why not," answered Ugo; "since those are my orders. I am commanded to be as your shadow: to bear your lute, to cut your meat, to comb your hair, to mend your clothes, and, most important and most difficult, to applaud your songs. All this by order of the Countess Alazais. It would seem she thinks well of you."

"Or ill of you," returned Aimar, and passed out into the corridor. Ugo followed him, like a small spaniel, down the stone stairs to the hall where, as the page had reported, were assembled perhaps a dozen women, with Alazais seated at the end on a high throne-like chair. She alone seemed cold and unmoved, and her pale

lips were curled in disdain of her over-susceptible companions.

"No man," thought Aimar, "not even Marlatz himself, is sufficient to quicken her pulse by a single beat."

I wonder if you can see her. Her gown was of royal purple, heavy with golden embroidery and girdled with crimson silk — wanton colors for one so colorless — and over her shoulders lay a white mantle trimmed with black fur. Her hair, bound at her temples by a golden fillet, fell in braids equally golden — braids that framed her narrow face and caressed her pointed, provoking chin. Blue were her eyes, and of that blue that is neither deep enough to be warm nor shallow enough to be cold; that perplexing, undecided blue that you get near the sky's horizon on a chill but sunny morning, when Nature is in doubt as to whether the season be summer or winter.

She sat queen-like — or better, empress-like — speaking little, and that little to the

ancient Guillerma, who flattered and fawned at her left. In the silences she studied her rings or held her long, narrow hands to the light to admire the whiteness of them.

At sight of Aimar, handsome enough in his scarlet and gold, she turned her head ever so slightly and stopped short full in the middle of a sentence. The Lady Guillerma reported later that color rose to her cheek — the cheek of Alazais, of course, not that of Guillerma — and that her lips started to smile, but were restrained from force of habit. Guillerma, however, being older, evidenced less self-control.

"An Apollo!" she exclaimed. "An Orpheus playing to the wild beasts! He has the bearing of the second Alfonso of Aragon. Bid him come nearer, Alazais, that I may feel my heart flutter. Ah me, I am sixteen again!"

"And warm for your years," returned Alazais sharply.

Nevertheless she raised a languid hand to Aimar and he came to her, with small

Ugo a pace behind him. She gave him her fingers to kiss, and when Guillerma exclaimed, "So soon!" she silenced her curtly.

Then they talked of divers matters of no importance. Aimar thanked her for her gift, and smuggled into his thanks no little flattery for the giver, touching lightly on the stars of her eyes and the sunshine of her hair. "And as he spoke," reported the ever-ready Guillerma, "it seemed, in truth, as though her eyes became starry, and her hair gleamed like sunlight on gold."

In a while came to them Matfre, the fat Monk of Béziers, puffing as though he had been wrestling with the devil.

"They have sighted dust rising from the road three miles or less beyond Gavarret. It will be Marlatz riding with many men. My lord Peire desires every male to be at the outer gate to receive him suitably, and to impress upon him that the Count Peire of Gavarret is as powerful as the Baron

Marlatz of Arc — which, to my poor mind, is ill-advised, inasmuch as the Baron comes frankly for love and not for war."

"I had rather it were the latter," said Alazais, and to Aimar's eye she seemed for the first time perturbed.

The Monk smiled and old Guillerma cackled joyfully.

"Alazais," she said, "was never fond of dark men."

"I married one," said Alazais, cold and short.

"Just so," returned Guillerma, beneath her breath.

"Peace be with you," soothed the Monk. "Dark or light, what is the difference? There be black schemes in golden heads and golden thoughts beneath raven locks; so why dispute? For me, I think the head that is shaven is the most trustworthy," and he tapped his own tonsured pate with an appreciative forefinger.

"And now," he went on, "if we be permitted, Aimar and I and this small Ugo

will out to the gate to swell my lord's retinue."

The permission being granted readily enough, the Monk took Aimar's arm and led him across the hall, exchanging on the passage pleasantries and salutations with several of the ladies. And there were some who, seeing Aimar with him, would have detained him had he not been resolute.

Leaving the hall, they came upon a corridor where, in a niche set back into the wall, was a stone bench; and on the stone bench sat Ermengarda and Savaric looking far into each other's eyes. And, lo, the browbeaten Ermengarda had become overnight a radiant Ermengarda, and the bashful, love-sick Savaric had taken to himself a manner that was little short of a swagger.

"That," said the Monk cheerfully, "is the effect of requited love; the woman blooms and the man struts and both are supremely happy. *Amor vincit omnia.*"

"It does," said Aimar piously; "it does indeed."

And then, his thoughts far away: "Is it not a beautiful name?"

"What?" demanded the Monk.

"Mascarose," murmured Aimar.

The Monk stared, laughed, and stared again.

VI

THERE SHALL COME A GREAT LORD TO WOO THE GREAT LADY

THE outer gate was lined with men-at-arms, moving to and fro metallically in their chain-armor, or leaning on their shields awaiting commands. In their midst sat Gavarret, black-bearded and frowning, astride a horse as black as he. He was lightly armed, but he carried his shield — *azur*, with three hearts *or* — and over his shoulders hung a cape of exquisite cloth of gold, that shone like a sun at noon. The trappings of his horse were of gold and blue, and the bridle and saddle were red as blood. If his lady Alazais could play the empress, he was all of an emperor.

Gathered about him were his captains of the guard and his squires and theirs — perhaps a score of mounted men — and

under them were a hundred footmen armed with bows or swords or pikes. A bristling reception for a peaceful one.

The Monk of Béziers surveyed the assembly with interest, resting a plump white hand protectingly on Aimar's shoulder.

"Mark those serfs," said he; "they are restless and discontented, they mutter and scowl and fret under Gavarret, and they would as soon cut his throat as his enemy's. That is because he uses them — grinds them — sucks them dry. They make fertile the land that he loans them and he reaps the harvest of their sweat. Do you wonder that they follow him with half hearts? Ah, had they but a leader, and did they but know their own strength, there would be no Count at Gavarret, no Baron Marlatz at Arc, nay —" and he lowered his voice — "no King in France. Some day this will come to pass, and when it does France will be wholesome again, as a man who has cast off a fever; for the strength of a nation lies not in the

rulers, but in the ruled. Suppose, now, that these poor wretches that you see here, tricked out as soldiers — suppose they should come to my lord of Gavarret and say: 'My lord, we will fight for you only so long as you allow us to retain all of the fruits of our labor — all that we sow and reap from the earth; all that our arrows strike in the air; all that our nets haul out of the sea. And what excess we have that we will sell to you for gold!' What, I say, would my lord of Gavarret find as answer to that?"

"He would find none," replied Aimar; "but his neighbors would be much pleased. Gavarret with no defenders would be easy to pluck. Marlatz, for example, would make short work of becoming Baron, not only of Arc, but of Gavarret; and my lord Peire, I doubt not, would hang from a tree in his own garden."

The Monk smiled.

"And if the men under Marlatz should make the same demands? And if Mar-

latz should not grant them? How, then, would he find the force to hang Gavarret in his own garden? See you not that all that is lacking to the serfs is a leader and the knowledge of their strength? When once they have formed a union they shall rule their rulers. They shall toil when and as long as they please; they shall cast down their arms, let us say, at the sixth hour of the evening, even if they be panting in the teeth of a battle; they shall demand recompense if they be wounded while fighting for their overlord; and if they be killed, their widows shall receive the value of their bodies in gold. That," the Monk chuckled, "will be a reckoning to try the brain of a Euclid."

"You prophesy fantastically," said Aimar.

"I will prophesy even more fantastically, then, if the word pleases you. I prophesy that the time shall come when he who is rich and powerful shall be counted dishonest if only because he is rich and

powerful; I prophesy that the dungeons shall be filled with the mighty and the thrones with the lowly, and that the red flame of revolt shall spread multi-tongued over all the earth. When that time shall come, my friend, men of my calling shall be held in low esteem; for the nations shall be struggling each man for himself and no man for the Christ who died to save him."

If Aimar let his wits wander during all this, perhaps he was not to be blamed; but, at any rate, when the Monk paused for approbation the troubadour, finding that the thread of the discourse had completely escaped him, could answer nothing more pertinent than a futile: "Ah, yes, truly." Indeed his gaze had been fixed on the white road that snaked its way up the cliff from the town of Gavarret; for his eye, quicker and younger than others, had detected sunlight gleaming on metal — a mere flash through the ragged trees that grew precariously in among the rocks.

"Marlatz is here," said Aimar, and as he spoke a trumpet screamed hoarsely — there were no silver notes in the Marlatz scale — and, rounding a blind bend in the road, appeared, two by two, a hundred horsemen, with Marlatz himself at their head.

"You are not like to mistake that sable shield of his with its three keys *argent*," said the Monk, pointing; "and mark how he sits a horse, as though they were of one piece."

At a nod from Gavarret, the trumpets sounded a welcome and the men stood at attention. Then Gavarret himself rode forward a few paces, reined in his horse and waited motionless, a statue silhouetted against the sky-line.

They came, the men of Marlatz, with great music of chain and mail; a hundred plumed helmets and a hundred tall spears resting in stirrups; and the beat of the hoofs echoing against the castle walls, ricochetted down into the valley below.

When Marlatz drew abreast of the Count, the latter wheeled and, joining him, rode by his side — and not one fraction of an inch behind him — up through the gate into the court. Although the last hundred yards of the road was lined impressively with Gavarret's armed men, Marlatz seemingly ignored them.

"He would not flicker an eyelid were there ten times as many," said the Monk to Aimar.

In truth the Baron of Arc appeared to be in a merry mood. Dismounting in the courtyard, he handed his helmet to his squire, seized the goblet of wine that one of Gavarret's pages held out to him, and drained it dry with a: "My lord of Gavarret, I drink the health of you and of whatsoever is yours."

"I thank you, my lord, and I bid you welcome to Gavarret," replied the Count, not ungraciously.

"And the Countess Alazais?" questioned Marlatz, after a decent interval.

"She awaits you with her ladies in the hall, my lord."

"Then to the hall by all means," cried the Baron of Arc, so enthusiastically that Gavarret bit his lip and frowned with black brows.

To the hall they went, leaving the underlings in charge of the seneschal and taking with them only the knights and their squires. Aimar and the Monk of Béziers, however, following in their rôles of privileged characters, found themselves not far behind the two leaders and so were able to hear much of their talk and to witness all of their actions. They were a striking pair of men as, side by side, they approached the Countess Alazais; both of them big men and dark; Marlatz the more commanding, Gavarret the more dangerous; Marlatz the Achilles and Gavarret the Ulysses.

"A woman," said the Monk of Béziers, "might love Marlatz; she would never do more than fear Gavarret."

To all observers, however (and there were keen eyes present), Alazais neither worshipped the Baron of Arc nor feared the Count of Gavarret. She arose, lily-pale in her glowing robe, and waited patiently while Marlatz bent and kissed her hand.

"A year," said the Baron, "has left you younger and fairer."

"That same year, my lord Baron, has taught you the art of flattery," she said with a trace of a smile, so slight that it might have concealed a sneer.

"It has been a year of peace for me," replied Marlatz — "a year which I have devoted to other pursuits than that of killing. Much wine has flowed, but no blood — at least none of my shedding. In a peaceful year a warrior improves his mind rather than his arm, and forgets the music of steel in listening to the strains of the viol. It is weakening, perhaps, but it makes for happiness, and it trains the eye for beauty and a proper appreciation of it."

"My lord of Arc was ever renowned for that," said Alazais coldly.

Marlatz bowed.

"'Tis but seldom I have occasion to practise it, then," he said. "Our ladies of Arc are —" he stopped abruptly; then he drew himself up to his great height and, looking Gavarret full in the eyes, said slowly: "There is but one all-beautiful Alazais in France, and she resides not at Arc but at Gavarret."

Followed a stir and a silence, while breaths were held in expectancy until Gavarret should answer. Alazais sat like a statue of ice, save that the line of her lips grew narrower and whiter. Nor did Gavarret flinch. He returned stare for stare, and his temper showed red in his eyes.

"There is but one Marlatz in France," said he, "and he resides and should continue to reside in Arc." And he turned abruptly on his heel to talk in a low voice to one of his captains. What he said no one heard.

VII

THE HERO SHALL OFFEND THE GREAT LADY

DURING the days that followed things went from bad to worse — Marlatz bold and ardent, Alazais cold and vexed, and Gavarret suspicious but biding his time. When two men love one frail woman, and she loves neither, there is trouble brewing.

Aimar, with wit beyond his years, kept clear of it as far as was possible; and had it not been for the lady of Gavarret herself, who, surfeited with the bickerings, the allusions, and the suspicions about her, sought him out for solace, he would have remained a mere spectator to the end.

It is true of all time that a woman must have a confidant, whether it be of her own sex or not; and, knowing this, God, in his wisdom, created Adam before Eve.

"There are many things," said the Monk of Béziers, "that a man will not tell a woman; but there are well-nigh none that a woman will not tell a man." In this instance the Monk proved to be right.

Before ten days had passed Aimar had learned from Alazais's pale lips matters that she had perhaps never before seen fit to recount to man or woman; and in ten days, had he been more of a courtier, he might have read in her eyes even more than those pale lips chose to speak.

"A woman," said the Monk of Béziers, "loves either brawn or brain; but loving one she despiseth the other."

Thus it came about that Aimar was summoned to attend his lady once every morning after matins, once in the full afternoon, if the men chanced to be away hawking, and, of course, after supper when he sang in the dining-hall. Gavarret, who under other conditions would have objected, was too busy watching the Baron of Arc; and the Baron of Arc was too busy with

his own affairs to pay heed to an intimacy between Alazais and her troubadour. Thus, when great men are warring for a prize, the humble are allowed to go their sweet way unmolested to pluck it.

But Aimar had no thought for plucking. An embroidered cushion at his lady's feet in the garden, a sky above him that matched her eyes, and a delicate scent of rose leaves in the air — there lay contentment such as he had never yet experienced; there lay his isle of oblivion. Of course, they conversed of love, of the theory of which he had much to tell her, and of the practice of which she could have told him more. At times it seemed to her (and the thought brought with it a stab of jealousy) that he spoke with an ardor and a sincerity unusual in one who, as he admitted, had never loved. Ingenuous boy, what instinct forbade him to relate to her the tale of the hawthorn-hedge and the girl with the unbound hair that fell, shining black, to her knees?

For now and again he would fall silent, and his eyes would look into those of Alazais and not see them; and that troubled the lady of Gavarret more than she would admit.

There came the day when she admitted it. It was an afternoon in the garden, he sitting at her feet. Above them was infinite blue, and the cypress shadows swayed blue-green on the grass. There was no sound, save when a breeze shivered the leaves above them, or when a bee deserted a white rose for a red. Aimar was dreaming, open-eyed, his hands clasping his knees. She, biting the stem of a clover-blossom, shot him a look from time to time, impatient for attention; and finally she touched him on the arm with her forefinger.

"Can you not save your dreaming for the night?" she demanded; "the day was made for realities."

"Are they ever as pleasant as dreams?" returned Aimar.

"We shape our own days," she said, "and we are, in a measure, responsible only to ourselves whether they be bright or dark; whereas over our dreams we have no control. What find you in your dreams to render the fruit of reality so bitter by comparison? The lady of your dreams, perchance, is dark — and I am fair; she is fat, and I am slender; she is apple-cheeked, and I am pale; her lips are full and red, and mine are — are not. Are these the things that make your dreams so pleasant to you? Is it for this that you tell me so coldly you have never loved and, in the same breath, glorify love as I have never heard it sung before? Ah, my Aimar, I, too, have dreamed dreams, and had my rude awakenings to reality. I have seen my girlhood steal away from me, and with it, one by one, my visions, like so many golden butterflies forsaking a fading flower. Think you the flower does not watch them go with regrets?

"See me now. I am old — I am one

and twenty, and five years a wife and two years a mother. Does that mean that my life has been lived? Does that mean that I am to be the plaything or the prize — call it which you will — for two bearded men to haggle over. Would you have me find my greatest joy in the certainty that my lord Peire of Gavarret, whom I tolerate but do not admire, is powerful enough to defend me from the hands of the Baron of Arc, whom I admire but do not tolerate? Am I so faded that there is naught left for me but the maudlin drivelings of two battle-hardened brutes?"

"Not so," replied Aimar uneasily; "you are the most beautiful creature that God has put into the world. Are you not the lily of Gavarret?"

"And what does that profit me," said she, vexed, "if you prefer the rose of Sharon!"

"Mascarose," murmured Aimar, his thoughts for the moment far from Gavarret. But, although he but whispered the name,

it escaped not the ears of Alazais. Then came the storm — the flush of anger followed by the pallor of pride and control; for Alazais was not countess at Gavarret for naught.

"Mascarose!" she said, choking. "That slut!" And she turned her back on him and left him, that he might not see the tears in her eyes.

"Women," the Monk of Béziers once said, "are never satisfied till they have learned all, and then they are dissatisfied that they have learned so much."

It was the Monk of Béziers whom Aimar sought in his perplexity. He found him writing at his *Breviary of Love*, a mighty work which was to expound all the learning that the Monk had amassed during a studious lifetime. The author, at Aimar's entrance, was in the throes of inspiration; his wontedly genial, round face was contorted almost beyond recognition, his brows were knit in a fashion that would have been savage had his eyebrows not been

so pale as to be indistinguishable, and the sweat stood out freely on his forehead. He turned, irascible, at the interruption.

"By all the saints!" he cried, "can I not be given a minute of peace in this world, if I must burn hereafter?"

"I entreat your pardon," said Aimar meekly, "and I retire."

"Too late," returned the other petulantly, "too late. You have snapped the thread, and the broidering cannot continue until it be reknotted. God's mercy, you understand not us who write with our heart's blood. 'Tis a bitter vocation and far removed from plucking lutestrings and singing sirventes."

"I fear," said Aimar, "that my days of plucking lutestrings and singing sirventes at Gavarret are numbered."

"How so?" asked the Monk.

"I have offended the Lady Alazais."

"You are not the first," said Matfre, "nor, doubtless, the last. Come, what was your offence?"

Aimar told it, and the Monk listened patiently until he heard mention of the name "Mascarose." Then he waved his hand for silence.

"Stop," he said. "Tell me of this Mascarose. Where knew you her? What is her appearance?"

"She is an angel from heaven!" cried Aimar, sparkling.

"Doubtless," returned the Monk. "They always are. However, I ask you where, this side of heaven, you encountered this angel, and if she has a father — an archangelic father who boasts as much beard as she has hair, and who walks somewhat on his two legs but mainly on a wooden staff."

"True," said Aimar, with great dignity, "her father is old and venerable and has a godlike beard. But she — ah, she is a black-eyed Madonna of the Fields — she is a lithe Diana —"

"You mix your faiths along with your similes," put in the Monk.

"She is cool as a breeze 'twixt night and dawn; she is fragrant as June!"

The Monk nodded.

"That," he said, "would be Mascarose."

"She is radiant as the sun in the east and as gentle as a caress."

"Quite so," agreed the Monk; "and she has a halo of black hair that all the female saints would envy. I see that we are thinking of the same person — and in truth she merits a good bit of thought. Now, where in heaven's name did you encounter this charming if unusual maiden — for maiden she is, without a shadow of a doubt, although there be some that hurl stones. Where, I say, did you encounter her? Surely not here at the castle?"

"Not at the castle," answered Aimar, "but behind a hawthorn-hedge."

"Ah," said the Monk, "just so. That would be in keeping. And how was she clad?"

"In white, with a crimson girdle below her breast."

"Good; she improves."

The Monk threw back his head and half shut his sharp little eyes. A smile twitched at the corners of his mouth.

"There is no denying that it is unfortunate," he remarked at length. "You must understand that this Mascarose, than whom a sweeter, purer girl never breathed, has been in the past the subject of some little interest. First, her venerable father — I use your own adjective — is reputed to be either mad or in league with the devil." Here the Monk instinctively crossed himself. "Secondly, they live together in the wildest part of the forest, unattended by serving-men and coming to the town only at rare intervals. Thirdly, and this by far the most serious, our Mascarose, until recently, was accustomed to traverse the country as naked as the day she was born. This, of course, while comfortable for her, was uncomfortable for such spectators as chanced to be in her road. The Lady Alazais, while riding with

her lord, saw her one day, sitting on a mossy rock by the bridle-path, combing her hair; and the comb was the only thing about her that God had not endowed her with at birth. Gavarret, it seems, thought it pretty, but Alazais commanded me to seek her out and urge her to conceal her charms after the fashion of other women. So I went to find her, my heart not overmuch in my mission, for it seemed to me wrong that such a glorious example of God's skill in modelling should be hidden from His children's sight."

"Nevertheless," said Aimar, blushing, "I think it right that she should be modestly clad."

"Yes," replied the Monk, "you would. However, inasmuch as she appears to have complied with the vulgar ideas of modesty, it is possible that she will be held in better esteem hereafter by those who, having nothing to reveal, are at great pains to conceal their lack. Mark me, I do not include Alazais in that category;

for I believe that she was never ill-disposed toward your Mascarose until you blurted out that you loved the girl."

"I said nothing of love," protested Aimar.

"Your tongue did not, perhaps," returned the Monk, "but the rest of you proclaimed it as with a thousand trumpets. The most foolish thing that a man can say to a woman is that he loves another; the next most foolish is to convince her that he has never loved another. I infer that you have done both. Ah, wrathful day!"

"*Dies iræ*, indeed," said Aimar dejectedly; "what shall I do to make amends? Kneel and beg a pardon?"

The Monk hesitated; then he turned to his table and the *Breviary of Love*.

"Sing to her. You have a voice."

There was a silence while he fumbled and arranged his sheets.

"Sing to her," he repeated without turning his head. "Sing to her and do

not bother me with your questions. My *Breviary of Love* is of far more importance to the world than a hundred lovers' quarrels. Consider the trash that is being written in these so-called enlightened years — jugglers of words, that is all the writers are; there is not a thinker amongst them. The Romans of Julius Cæsar's time had more learning than we, with all our pretending, and the Greeks taught the Romans all they knew. In what has our so-called civilization advantaged us, save that the women are more nearly our masters than formerly; and in time I doubt not but that they will be ruling the nation, while we men sit by our hearths and mend their hose. To my mind the Rise of Woman is of far more importance than was ever the Fall of Man."

"'Tis a dark picture you paint," said Aimar, amused.

"Yes, and the darker because no one is willing to believe me. Now go and sing if you have the heart for it. Poor,

blind children! You see not that the times are out of joint, for you have eyes only for to-day. To what is the race of men coming — you care not. Go and sing!"

VIII

THE HERO SHALL STRIVE TO MAKE AMENDS

THAT evening, after supper in the high dining-hall, Aimar was, as usual, summoned to the dais to assist noble digestions with soothing music. Customs have changed but little!

He sought Alazais with his eyes, but she looked everywhere save at him — and mostly she looked at Marlatz, Baron of Arc, who was seated at her right hand, cool and confident and dominant in the midst of a hostile house.

Gavarret himself, at the other end of the long table, never let his glance travel from the two of them. He observed, however, without seeming to observe, for this was according to the nature of the man.

The Monk of Béziers, too, was there,

drinking copiously of the wine to refresh himself after his day's labor at his *Breviary of Love*, and, astute man that he was, he perceived trouble suspended sword-like by a thread. At that moment he would have recalled his advice to Aimar to sing and would have substituted: "For Heaven's love, hold your tongue!"

The cheeks of Alazais held more than their wonted color, and her speech less than its wonted reserve. She talked at random; she laughed often and for no cause; she encouraged Marlatz and then she spurned him; she played with him, warmed him, chilled him, laughed with him, and then at him. And Marlatz was too strong a man to tantalize with impunity.

Ermengarda and her Savaric sat side by side, eating only when they could bear to release each other's hands, which was seldom; and the Lady Guillerma kept an aged face and a youthful eye on young Ugo, Aimar's small page, in whom her

weather-beaten heart hoped to find a calm haven.

Eyes seeking eyes and hands clasping hands! Is this the castle that Aimar found so mirthless, so loveless? Whisperings and blushes, jealousies and embraces, bold advances and shy retreats, glances that meant killing and glances that meant kissing — what havoc he had wrought with a song or two and a credo, the foremost article of which was the Divinity of Love!

Once during the meal Marlatz touched the hand of Alazais with his. Doubtless it was an accident, but as it was beneath the table, and no one but he and she was the wiser, he grasped her fingers and held them. Alazais laughed nervously and withdrew her hand, and for a while she dared not look at him. At any rate, here was a man, not unhandsome, and certainly fearless and strong to the tips of his fingers. He, at least, loved her after his forceful, commanding way — and Aimar loved another. She turned to Marlatz.

"My lord," she said in an undertone, "our fingers were given us to eat with."

"It is not food that I am hungry for," replied the Baron of Arc.

"A warrior should eat," said she.

"And a lover should fast," he answered coolly, as though he were discussing the earliness of spring.

"Fasting weakens the arm; have you no thought for to-morrow's match?"

"Fasting quickens the heart; I have thought only for to-night."

If Marlatz had no thought for the tournament which had been heralded for the morrow, not so Gavarret, you may be sure. It was unfortunate, but well-nigh compulsory, that some match-at-arms be held during a visit such as this. Hospitality demanded it.

"It is tempting trouble," the Monk of Béziers had warned.

"So much the better," had replied Gavarret. "I welcome trouble with open arms."

"Marlatz has an hundred strong knights. They are renowned throughout France."

"I have an hundred to meet them, and more the glory for us when we overcome them."

The Monk had shrugged his shoulders and desisted.

"Perhaps it were better they should cool their blood in a sham battle than lose it in earnest," he thought.

Now Marlatz welcomed the proposal, but gave it little thought, being too seasoned a knight to lose sleep over a mimic fight with blunted spears. Besides, he had weightier matters revolving in his brain, and none so weighty as the courtship of his host's wife. Mark how modern were his motives and morals!

Such, then, was the condition of things when Aimar was summoned to the dais to sing.

"My lords and ladies," he began, "although I have hitherto sung to you of love and of war, of gallant words and of

gallant deeds, my attitude has been always more that of the painstaking and sympathetic chronicler than of the warrior or the lover. I have praised love to you in the abstract; I have glorified it as I might have glorified faith or charity, curbing any desire I had to improvise on my own heart-strings. But we are all of us frail, and to all of us our own concerns are ever uppermost in our regard. A man may praise his horse, but he will be reflecting how well he sit him; a woman may admire a jewel, but she will be thinking how it will shine in her hair. The fairest rose is the one we have given or the one that has been given to us. Thus it is with me. All true love is beautiful and worthy of being sung, but the most beautiful love to me is that which lies nearest my own heart."

Thereupon he sang, beginning in a white key — rather colorless. He sang of Alazais, of course, depicting her as a white lily in the valley of Gavarret — all white

save where the sunlight struck her hair and transmuted it to spun gold; all white save where the azure sky was reflected, glorified, in her eyes; all white save where the delicate pink of the carnation had kissed her lips. No mention, you notice, he made of roses. Alazais, her chin in her hands, gazed at him beneath lowered eyelids, and her cheeks were far from white. As he proceeded, Aimar warmed to his work; his words gained passion, his tones sincerity, and yet all the time his heart told him he was committing black treason. But it is ever the way with poets to grow drunk on their own songs.

Marlatz, shifting uneasily in his chair, lost for the first time that majestic composure that had marked him since his arrival; and Gavarret knew not whether to be amused at Marlatz's discomfiture or vexed at Aimar's impudence.

"That boy," thought the Monk of Béziers, "will be strangled by one or the other of these ardent warriors before the

evening be ended; and Alazais will weep at the grave, if that will be of consolation to him. The strings are overtaut, I fear. One of them is bound to snap."

As for Ermengarda and her Savaric, they were busy reading in each other's eyes those subtleties of love that both of them knew but that neither could express. And the Lady Guillerma simpered at small Ugo, who was serving her, with all the coyness of insatiable middle age.

As the song proceeded, each verse bolder and more tender, Alazais, breathing quick and short through parted lips, kept her eye fixed on the singer. She stirred not in her chair save that her fingers played nervously yet persistently with her rings.

At the last verse Aimar turned full to her, and she shuddered at sight of his eyes. He seemed to be lashing his heart to song as fanatics lash their bodies to salvation. He sang deliriously, in exaltation that was not wholesome; he sang tempestuously, but it seemed to some who were there

that he dared not hesitate lest his singing turn to sobbing.

He plucked savage, feverish discords from the strings and concluded. The words burnt his throat like a fever.

> Lady, white as lilies slender,
> Sweet as June-wind in the morn,
> Look with pity on surrender,
> Eyes like thine are not for scorn.
> Ask no lover for a reason;
> Where it lists the heart-wind blows;
> Ev'ry flower has its season —
> Lily, I deny the rose!

A silence while people eyed each other and breaths were released. And only three there knew the full meaning of the verse: Alazais knew and the Monk of Béziers knew and Aimar, God pity him, knew.

A silence while people waited a sign from Peire of Gavarret! But Alazais waited not. Perhaps she sought further proof; perhaps, like others of her sex, she was not content to be generous in her triumph; perhaps (and who shall blame her?)

she wanted deeds as well as words. Whatever her motive, she is pardonable, being a woman and sorely tried.

On the cloth in front of her glowed a score of crimson roses — brutally significant. With white fingers that trembled she raised one above her head and flung it fairly at Aimar's feet. The applause died still-born.

In an instant Aimar was on his knees, the rose at his lips.

"It is false!" he cried with a sob. "My song was a black lie and I am not worthy to sing again. Behold it, all of you! It is the rose — the crimson rose — the rose no redder than her lips, no sweeter than her breath, no softer than her touch — it is the rose that, God forgive me, I denied and that now, before God, I enshrine in my heart until that heart shall at last be still."

A silence, infinite, while he staggered to his feet, raised his lute, and broke it fiercely across his knee with a sick grinding of

rended strings. The two pieces fell jangling to the floor.

Alazais sat, white and motionless, while they led him away.

IX

THE VILLAIN AND THE GREAT LORD SHALL PROVIDE ENTERTAINMENT

NIGHT came like a cool hand on the brow of that feverish day. Through the open window of Aimar's room stole the soothing perfume of the garden, and not far away a nightingale was singing as though life held no sorrow. A round moon, wantonly golden, shone through the topmost branches of the cypresses, silhouetting their restless shadows on the grass. Save for the nightingale, there was no sound but the slight, musical note of the fountain, splashing on the lily-pads in the marble-lined pool.

Aimar knelt by the window, resting his hot forehead on the stone sill, weak with misery.

"I betrayed my first love," he moaned;

"I betrayed my first love. I denied the rose. Gentle Mary, intercede for me in heaven, that my sin be forgiven me. Pitying Mary, hear my vow; for this is the penance I have dealt unto myself. Never again will I sing until that time when Mascarose, having heard my full and contrite confession, shall raise me from my knees and grant me absolution and the kiss of peace. Pitying Mary, hear my vow!"

He rested in silence a moment, his lips moving in prayer. Then he crossed himself and rose to his feet, and as he did so there came a sound to his ears that was neither the song of the nightingale nor the splashing of the fountain.

"It is the wind in the cypresses," he said to himself, knowing it was not so. He listened intently until there could be no doubt in his mind. A woman was sobbing quietly in the tree-shadows down by the pool.

Alazais, lily of Gavarret, mistress of

all that eye can see from the towers of your castle, Alazais the haughty, Alazais the proud, sphinx-like Alazais, where are your titles now? Men called you cold as ice, unbendable, unbreakable; and, behold, you are weeping like any love-sick girl jilted by her ploughboy lover!

"All women are alike at bottom," said the Monk of Béziers; "but there are some who conceal it."

She knelt, a white, crumpled figure, by the pool, shrinking as far as she might back into the shadow of the yews, and her hair, unbraided, fell about her shoulders like a golden flame. In her bitterness she wished it black — black as night — blacker than that of Mascarose. Then, despising herself for a maudlin fool, anger came to save her from further tears; but always at the bottom of her heart lay that leaden weight — that intangible something that strangles laughter and saddens a smile; that still voice that through the ages has made potential poets of us all.

So she sat, dry-eyed at last, and the moonlight showered more gold on her golden hair.

Out from the castle to her came a cloaked, heroic giant, Marlatz, Baron of Arc. He stood an instant, hesitating on the terrace, filling his lungs with the fresh night air, and brushing his eyes with the back of his hand, for he had come from the garish light of the dining-hall. Then he saw her by the pool and went to her straight; as though she were already his. If she saw him coming, she gave no sign. He knelt by her, took both her cold hands in his and kissed them; and though she did not so much as look at him she made no move to draw them away.

"My lady," he said quietly, "you have no cloak and the night air holds fever."

"I care not overmuch," she answered. Nevertheless he unbuckled his own cloak and put it across her shoulders; and he did it so tenderly it was like a caress.

"There are others that care," he said.

Her laugh was short and mirthless.

"Are there?" she inquired carelessly; but she turned and looked at him at last.

"There is one, at least," he replied; "can you not believe me?"

"Yes," said she, "I think I believe you. Did you not fancy the prey you would not waste so much time on the hunting."

"Do you wish me to cavil at the brutality of your terms? And why? Who of us does not hunt the prey he deems most desirable? In what else does life consist for a man but in snaring, scheming, and hunting? If he wants honor he must hunt it; if he wants lands he must hunt them; or gold, or a crown, or a man's life, or a woman's love — 'tis ever the same — they are all of them but prey that fall to the patient huntsman. But, ah, my Lady Alazais, do not think because I look truth thus squarely in the face that I have not woven about you a thousand subtle mysteries, that you have not engendered a host of lover's dreams, that in my heart

I have not haloed you with fragrant romance. I take what I find, but I aspire beyond what I may take. In looking on you I have looked high; have I looked too high? It is for you to say?"

Having spoken, he waited patiently her answer; waited patiently and silently, only his eyes betraying his desire. She shivered slightly and drew the cloak about her. Why deny to herself that it gratified her, this knowledge that she had the power to bring Marlatz, Baron of Arc, to her feet? Fascinating to women are the shears of Delilah.

To gain time, she replied mechanically, according to rule:

"What is there for me to say, my lord, save that I am and will be a loyal wife to Peire of Gavarret as long as he shall live?"

"There is much else," replied Marlatz firmly. "At a sign from you I would see to it that Peire of Gavarret cease to live to-morrow, and in fair fight, too."

"Baron of Arc," she answered him coldly, "you shall have no sign from me. I take not a murderer for a lover."

"I said, in fair fight," he repeated. "I do not stab in the back."

"Ah, but who can resist the Baron of Arc?" said she, lowering her eyes. "Is there one in France he cannot overcome?"

"Is there one?" he asked meaningly.

"Who knows?" she answered.

A sound of running feet on the terrace paving interrupted them.

"Listen," whispered Alazais, rising; "what is it?"

"Some one from the hall," said Marlatz. "There was much drinking after dinner and running would be easier to many than walking."

"My husband — where is he? In the hall?"

"Yes," replied Marlatz, "with the others. I left him in excellent good humor."

The footsteps drew nearer and slack-

ened, and out of the night appeared Aimar, breathless and white.

"My lord and my lady," he began, panting, "I ask your pardons, both."

Marlatz made a gesture of impatience and swore beneath his breath.

"Nay, I beg you to listen," said Aimar quickly. "My lord of Gavarret has but now come out on the terrace in search of you, my lady. I heard him in the corridor and dropped from my window to the ground that I might arrive the first; but he will not be far behind."

"What matters it?" put in Marlatz easily. "As well meet now as later."

"Not so," said Aimar; "my lord of Gavarret has been drinking, and, as all know, when his blood is hot his hand is quick."

"That much the better," said Marlatz. "I have ever loved a quick hand. 'Tis these slow-moving men I despise; their blood runs so sluggishly in their veins that an encounter with them is like unto

pig-sticking, save that the pig, once stuck, is of more service to mankind."

"My lord, your wit is nimble," interrupted Alazais, "but, manlike, you forget the woman present. Have I no claims?"

"I will do anything that you bid me, save run," replied the Baron of Arc.

"Then," said Alazais, "you force me to do what you will not"; and she started away.

But it was too late — Gavarret, flushed with wine and smiling poisonously, was with them. With a drunkard's cunning he had stolen upon them under cover of their voices.

"A merry evening, in truth," he said, enjoying their discomfiture, for even Marlatz had his moment of embarrassment. "A merry evening and good company. I rejoice that my sweet wife has not been left alone to enjoy the moonlight — my troubadour and my guest, the Baron of Arc — good company, indeed, for my sweet

wife. A maudlin, snivelling boy and a treacherous guest, and both of them engaged in describing to her the brutish drunkenness of her blind husband. Poor sot of a husband! 'Tis a pity he is in his cups so often; and withal it is a blessing, for, were he not so occupied with drinking, perchance he would have sent his wife's lovers to burn in hell before now."

"Count of Gavarret," said Marlatz between his teeth, "whatever blame you choose to bestow, I ask you to lay it on me. I found the Lady Alazais here alone, and I intruded on her against her wish."

"You take a weight from my mind, Baron of Arc," returned Gavarret, sarcastically; "I had fancied my wife the pursuer and you the coy pursued. I rejoice that the reverse is true."

He turned to Alazais, standing, white, beside him.

"My most sweet lady," he said, "I

request you to leave us that I may thank your friends suitably. I wish you pleasing dreams and soft slumber, and may your eyes be brighter and your cheeks less pale on the morrow."

"My lord," said Alazais wearily, "there is naught to be gained by talking further to-night —"

"Just so," he broke in; "I purpose to put an end to talking at once. Deeds, deeds! Is not that ever your cry?"

"If that be your cry, Gavarret," said Marlatz, "you shall have them, and all you can stomach. Have you forgotten the tilting to-morrow?"

The count laughed harshly.

"Not I," he answered; "I have been nursing the thought of it as a mother would her babe."

"Then, my lord," said Alazais, "if you must fight, let it be to-morrow."

"If you will sleep the sounder for thinking so, why, then, leave us and sleep soundly. And, stop! — a last kiss before

you go; 'tis a lover's privilege, but a husband's right."

Bravely she held up her lips to him; but as he leaned unsteadily toward her she could not restrain a shudder, half fear, half loathing. He read her feelings in her eyes, and the blood rushed to his head. His teeth gleamed white through his beard as he stood sneering at her, snarling at her.

"So you fear to soil your lips!" he cried, and struck her full across the mouth with his open hand.

In an instant Marlatz was upon him. They fought, locked in each other's arms, staggering, panting, slipping on the grass. And they fought silently, as strong men fight.

It was a strange scene that the moon witnessed that night: two men primitively struggling on the grass beside a marble pool, their uncannily distorted shadows swaying with them in unison, like black ghosts; a boy, standing under the yews,

struck with horror at his first glimpse of the beast in man; and a woman beside him, motionless, her white face half hidden in her cloak, her eyes speaking contempt rather than fear. Small wonder the nightingale ceased to sing.

"Behold," said Alazais scornfully — "behold the flower of France. They fight like dogs!"

The outcome was not long in doubt. Warriors they were both, and sons of warriors; but the breed of Marlatz had never feared an outcome, had never doubted the omnipotence of their star. Victorious generations had handed down confidence as their most priceless legacy and the sable arms of the Barons of Arc knew not the color of the dust.

Gavarret, the lighter, would, had he been sober, have been the quicker of the two. Indeed, at the beginning, he seemed to fare the better. Wine, however, had given him a stimulus that was but temporary — a flash of physical inspiration,

as it were. When he felt this leaving him, his left hand crept toward the dagger at his belt.

Aimar saw and shouted a warning.

And then the god of battles intervened before black murder should be committed; for Gavarret, giving ground, had been forced slowly, step by step backward, perilously close to the fountain. With a smothered curse Marlatz gripped him by the shoulders and, bringing all his great strength to bear, flung him back and away.

There followed a giant splash, and a shower of golden spray shot up into the moonlight. A dagger, significantly bare, gleamed white on the grass. Thus does comedy ever run close on tragedy's heels.

Marlatz wiped the sweat from his forehead and folded his huge arms across his breast. For an instant there was no sound but his quick breathing; then came a confused splashing from the pool.

Alazais laughed shrilly.

"I bid you good-night, gentlemen," she said, "and I thank you for the entertainment," and, slipping Marlatz's cloak from her white shoulders, she sought the castle.

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X

THERE SHALL BE TREACHERY

WHAT need to describe what followed? It is scant chivalry to picture a brave if drunken knight spluttering in a pool in his own garden. Rather let it be deemed sufficient to state that when Gavarret emerged, shaking himself like a dog, his brain was sobered but his anger was not cooled. Although a thorough wetting may lop the branches off a man's fury, the roots will only pierce the deeper on that account.

So we pass quickly to the next morning — the morning of the tournament of arms.

The Lady Alazais had lain that night in the room of her mother, Guillerma, not so much through fear of her lord's temper, as through a quite natural desire to avoid

his recriminations. What man is there who, having been worsted outside his walls, does not vent his spleen on his wife once he is safely home?

It was only to be expected, then, that Guillerma should have been informed of the affair at the pool. She chuckled aloud and fairly glowed on learning of the ducking administered to the Count of Gavarret; for Guillerma had never been overfond of her son-in-law, albeit quite willing to live on his bounty. Consequently she proved a ready partisan to Alazais.

"My poor, white dove!" she exclaimed at intervals during the agitated recital; and when this threatened to lose its force she substituted: "My poor, white lamb." White, in any case, was the color.

But Alazais, outwardly confident of her own innocence, was not quite so sure in her remotest mind that her whiteness was unblemished. The presence of this doubt she revealed by an over-constant reiteration of its absence, thus:

"I had gone to the garden merely to cool my head before retiring, and when the Baron of Arc joined me I said: 'Baron of Arc, I will not listen to you. I am an honest wife.'"

"My poor, white dove," said Guillerma, soothing her.

And again:

"My lord must be mad to think I could so much as look on the Baron of Arc. He knows I dislike dark men."

"My poor, white lamb," said Guillerma.

The fact that Guillerma espoused her cause so vehemently quieted all of Alazais's misgivings to such an extent that when she awoke in the morning her heart was light and her conscience clean. If aught troubled her it was the mapping out of a suitable attitude to observe with regard to Aimar. When all was said and done, he was the one person at fault. It was his madness in the supper hall that had driven her sobbing to the garden, where, doubtless, he had spied on her

from his window. He had seen her and Marlatz by the pool (that unsettled her for a short minute), and he had heard Gavarret stumbling drunkenly in the corridor and fumbling at the door. Then, evil-minded boy, he had taken it upon him to race madly out and warn them — as if they had been lovers and had needed warning. Impudence, self-assurance, that was what she termed it.

"My poor, white dove," soothed Guillerma.

"Enough of that," snapped Alazais, once more herself, and Countess of Gavarret.

When she summoned her women to dress her she was so much the countess that they dared not express their astonishment at her desertion of her lord's bed. You may be sure it had been much discussed.

"'Tis a wondrous fine day for the tilting, my lady," said one of them, Stazailla, in order to break an uneasy silence.

"Is it, truly?" vouchsafed the lady of Gavarret.

"They have marked the lists already and are building the pavilions," continued the girl, busy with the comb.

But Alazais contemplated herself in her hand-mirror and shrugged her white shoulders.

"Try not to pull so hard," she said sweetly, "you are tearing my hair from my head."

The Lady Guillerma, still in the bed, yawned shamelessly.

"This tilting wearies me," she said. "I can remember when men were so busy slaying their enemies — and friends, too, for that matter — that they had no time to waste on toy warfare. That was when I was young. Heigh-ho — old, I may be — you have called me so often, my lamb — but, glory to the saints, I have retained my girlish figure."

" 'Tis marvellous," spoke up Stazailla, with tact. "You are virginally slim and

at the same time matronly rounded. Master Ugo commented on it but yesterday in my hearing."

"Did he, now?" exclaimed Guillerma, rousing herself, and putting a cautious foot to the floor.

The second girl, Biatritz, as blond as Stazailla was dark, hurried to lend an arm, but Guillerma waved her back.

"Not this morning," she said genially, "not this morning. I am as young and as agile as the youngest and quickest of you." And she proved it by dressing herself unaided, while Alazais monopolized the attentions of both the maids.

"What jewels, my lady?" asked Stazailla, when all was complete save the final touches.

"All of them," replied Alazais shortly. "Is it not a festival?"

So they twined barbaric gems in her golden braids — rubies and beryls and violet amethysts; and they studded her girdle with sapphires deeper than her eyes; they

weighted her slim fingers with heavy rings, and they circled her head with a narrow fillet of diamonds — plunder out of the East.

When they had finished they gazed at their work in rapture and marvelled at the glory of her.

The lists had been laid out on that smooth stretch of grass beyond the garden, where Aimar had sung his first song at Gavarret. As he and the Monk of Béziers made their way toward it now, he recalled the event with mixed emotions. He seemed to himself to have grown many years older in wisdom and experience during the score of days that he had lived at the castle. He wondered vaguely if he had not lost some of the bloom of his youth — if the shining edge of his enthusiasm had not been dulled.

"Sweet Lord, let me keep my dreams," he prayed. "Let me believe in the fairness of women and the honor of men. For losing this I lose all."

The Monk of Béziers broke in on him.

"You are sad," he said. "Your face is not suitable for a day of *fête*."

"I fear," replied Aimar, "there will be no *fête*. Clouds are lowering and the wind blows from a bad quarter."

The Monk lifted invisible eyebrows.

"You speak in metaphor," he said, "but I can interpret. The whole castle has heard by now what happened last night in the garden. To tell the Lady Guillerma a confidence is as good as despatching a hundred heralds with a hundred trumpets."

"Ah," said Aimar, "I am glad you know."

The Monk shrugged.

"We can do nothing," he said, "but wait and watch. There will be blood shed to-day unless a miracle be manifested."

Reaching the end of the garden and the tall cypresses that marked its limit, they came out onto the field — no longer a peaceful expanse of grass, but teeming,

scintillating, glowing with steel, rocking with the tramp of horses and of men, echoing with the murmur of voices and the brazen calling of trumpets.

At either end of the field was a huge pavilion — red, striped with darker red — and over each of these hung two shields, the shield of peace and the shield of war. Along the far side of the field a gallery for the women had been erected, gay with tapestries and silks, come all the way from Damascus.

As Aimar and the Monk looked about them, they saw, on their right, Gavarret's knights, a hundred and more, all in full armor, their hundred spears resting in their stirrups. They were moving about restlessly on their horses, circling, stopping, backing, spurring, curbing — ever in motion. Gavarret himself remained as yet in his pavilion.

On the left were ranged the knights of Marlatz, sitting their horses motionless, like men of iron, and the Baron of Arc

was at their head, grim and gigantic in his black mail.

In and out, under the horses' heads, dodged the squires, adjusting buckles and straps, shortening chains, tightening plates; and up and down the lists rode the heralds, trumpeting shrilly, and pausing at fixed intervals to announce the terms of the match.

"Right worshipful and redoubted ladies," they proclaimed, "there are come into your high and mighty presence two good knights and true, known for their deeds of arms through all fair France; Marlatz, Baron of Arc, and Peire, Count of Gavarret. With them, and commending themselves likewise to your good grace, are two-score gentlemen, twenty of whom follow one and twenty the other. And they do beseech you to look on their jousting with eyes not blinded by favor, but to duly and fairly grant unto them who do comport themselves the best such reward as they shall deserve."

Thus went the proclamation.

The gallery had filled rapidly with women — Ermengarda was there, her eager eye seeking Savaric among the knights of Gavarret; Guillerma was there with Ugo, the page, at her elbow, and finally, to a murmur of admiration, Alazais took her seat in the centre, pale, self-possessed, regal, and beautiful as she had never looked before. Behind her followed the dark-haired Stazailla and the blond Biatritz.

And still more were coming down through the garden from the terrace: townspeople on a holiday, farmers, shopkeepers, and a priest or two; a scattering of sombrely clad monks and a handful of giggling village girls, hand in hand with their lovers.

A breeze, sweeping lengthwise across the field, caught up all the various voices and blended them into a steady, persistent murmur, like that of incessant surf.

"It sounds cheerful enough," said the Monk of Béziers, "but there be many hearts beating overfast, I warrant."

"One of them is mine," replied Aimar. "I mistrust Gavarret."

"So, too, does Marlatz, I imagine, after last night. 'Tis better, perhaps, that his eyes are open."

As he spoke a hush spread over the field, and Gavarret rode out from his pavilion, his azure shield aglow in the sun. Instantly his knights formed in line, while he selected twenty from them to fight behind him.

"A score on each side," said the Monk of Béziers, "and they fight, of course, with blunted lances."

With Marlatz there was no question of selection. He motioned forward the first twenty in the ranks. It was as though he knew his weakest knight was amply strong. Then, putting spurs to his horse, he galloped up the lists and, according to custom, beat with his spear on the shield of peace that ornamented Gavarret's pavilion.

"The shield of peace! Thank God for

that at any rate," breathed the Monk, and his sigh of relief was echoed from other lips.

A blast on the trumpets, and the two lines formed — two lines of fretting, lathering horses and of ominous, armored men.

A second blast and they were off.

"Mercy of God!" cried the Monk in Aimar's ear, "did you mark Gavarret at the last minute? One of his squires, standing by his saddle-bow, handed him up a new lance."

"And what then?" said Aimar impatiently, his eyes fixed on the lists.

"And what then? Only this. Look there in the centre — do you see Gavarret?"

"Yes, I see him now."

"Do you see the point of the new lance? Look closely. Can you see it? No blunt spear that — it is sharpened for blood!"

"Yes," cried Aimar, and then: "God have mercy on all of us! It is nought less than murder."

"It *is* murder," said the monk dryly — "treacherous murder."

Two-score knights and two-score horses came together with a clamor that echoed down and across the quiet little valley of Gavarret — a steely clamor that set the blood afire in the veins of many an ambitious village youth, and of many a romantic maiden. Two-score knights — and all of them riding straight and true, lances couched, plumes waving, armor gleaming.

Marlatz and Gavarret, in the centre of the lists, made for each other like magnets. Marlatz, for one, was a pleasure to watch: a skilful horseman, cool, confident, debonair. It was not easy to mistake his great bulk with its sable armor and silver trimmings, and the shield — sable, three keys *argent*.

He rode at Gavarret not overfast, but with the inevitableness of God's wrath. Then he saw the pointed head of his adversary's spear, and knew he was facing treachery.

"You black whelp!" he cried, and sunk his spurs into his horse's flanks.

In the mêlée, half of the knights went down — most of them Gavarret's — and retired unhurt, while their squires pursued the stampeding horses. Lances were splintered on both sides as though they had been made of straw, armor was battered and a little blood was lost. But no slaughter.

And then those who had caught their breath looked for Marlatz and Gavarret. They beheld Gavarret on the ground, unhurt, and the Baron of Arc erect on his horse, grim as a war-god, but bleeding from a gash in his left shoulder.

"À Marlatz!" he shouted. "À Marlatz!"

His men were about him in an instant, pressing him, shouting questions. Before answering he turned to his squire.

"Bring me the spear of Peire of Gavarret!" he said briefly. "It lies there on the ground beside him." The squire hesitated: it was against custom.

"Bring it to me!" said the Baron sharply; "or, by Heaven, you shall not live to hear me repeat a command."

Gavarret's men by now were getting him to his feet. His fall had stunned him — no worse. He, too, pointed to his spear that lay, unbroken, on the ground.

"The spear!" he said vaguely. "Get me the spear!"

There was a hush over the field. No one as yet understood.

Marlatz's squire reached the spear first, picked it up, examined it, and, with a cry, held it up at arm's length in the air. The end of it glistened with Marlatz's blood — and the end of it had been sharpened to kill.

"Treachery!" cried the squire, and brought it up on the run.

Marlatz smiled grimly; but the cry was taken up by his knights, their voices hoarse with anger. He silenced them with a gesture, cast his blunted spear to the ground, and seized the one painted with his own

blood. Then for a second time he galloped up the lists, as straight and steady as before, and halted at Gavarret's pavilion. Thrice he beat on the shield of war, and thrice again. And at every blow its azure face was stained ominously with red blood.

A cry of horror and of awe ran shivering across the field.

"The shield of war!"

Some looked at Gavarret; others, more morbid, at Alazais. From her they got little satisfaction; she had not altered a muscle. Gavarret was mounting a fresh horse.

The men of Marlatz were drawn up across their end of the lists in two lines of fifty each; and, as before, they stood motionless, only their anger voiced itself in a low, threatening murmur like distant thunder. Marlatz, steadying his horse on the rein, sat at their head, the blood from his shoulder crimson against his sable mail. There he waited.

No occasion now for heralds; no labored

expounding of rules and conditions. It was man against man, life against life. And Gavarret, understanding, felt cold fear fingering at his throat. He called to him one of his captains.

"On no account," he commanded, "and whatever the result, will you allow my men to interfere. They will not fight unless they be attacked. In that case they must fight, and fight as if they were defending their souls from hell — which, most like, they will be."

Thus it was understood; single combat, and God help the vanquished!

The sun, now directly overhead, burnt hot on the field, gleaming on brass and steel and gold, and intensifying the brilliant colors of the women's dress. The banners in the still air hung from their standards, limp as sails in a dead calm. The atmosphere was tense — that tenseness wrought by a multitude talking in whispers. A laugh would have seemed profanity.

The Lady Guillerma, by the side of Alazais, reached across and took her hand.

"You are pale, my sweet one," she said. "Do you fear so much for your lord?"

"I fear not at all for my lord's life," answered Alazais wearily. "I feared for his honor, which is lost. That gone, his life is of little value."

"You are hard," said Guillerma, shocked for once. "Nay," returned the lady of Gavarret, "I am just."

Even the whispering ceased and the galleries were silent when the two knights rode at each other. Their horses' feet, pounding the soft grass, gave back but little sound. It was strangely like a pantomime; people lived, loved, and battled, were true or were false, slew or were slain, with scarcely a spoken word.

Marlatz, in his rôle of challenger, started the first. This time he rode hard and mercilessly. Gavarret was more cautious, seeking to deliver his blow once more on the already crippled left shoulder. They

met, near the middle of the field, with a shock that sent Gavarret's horse staggering to its haunches. Marlatz received Gavarret's thrust full on his shield, and the impact shivered the lance at its grip. As for Gavarret, he leaned out on his horse and took a glancing blow at an angle. Such, though, was the power behind Marlatz's arm that the point of his spear, already baptized with blood, bored its way through shield and breastplate and, tearing the flesh under Gavarret's right armpit, received a second baptism.

Marlatz hurled his lance far from him.

"I will kill you fair," he growled.

They dismounted and drew their swords.

On the ground Gavarret's quickness told; and all the while Marlatz was losing blood from his shoulder. Gavarret's flesh-wound, although on the side of his sword arm, appeared to bother him little. He was in and out through the other's guard, quick as a cat; he circled him, he touched him lightly several times, and always he avoided

the savage overhand blows that, arriving, would have split his head like an egg.

But his quick foot-work came near being his undoing. Once, getting away, he slipped on the grass and fell flat on his back. Marlatz prodded him lightly with his foot.

"Get up and die on your feet," he said contemptuously, and Gavarret was only too willing.

But Marlatz now, changing his attack, was after him with rapid, slashing strokes from the side — strokes that were well-nigh impossible to avoid and desperately difficult to parry. One after another they beat on Gavarret's shield, first on the right then on the left, allowing him no opportunity for the offensive. He felt himself giving way, growing weaker, and fear once more gripped him at the throat. Warding off a vicious stroke with his shield he exposed his body recklessly and lunged out at Marlatz the full length of his arm. His sword bit deep into the other's side. At the same moment, Marlatz, seeing his

opening, dealt him an overhead blow that stretched him crumpled on the grass.

Among Gavarret's men there followed much confusion. Commands were given and countermanded, swords were drawn and put away, men ran up and down, madly, under no leader or under too many. Some were for immediate vengeance; others remembering Gavarret's words, urged patience; and there were not a few that knew Gavarret had got what he merited.

Meanwhile the men of Marlatz remained grimly patient as before, save that they pressed closer to their lord. A black, powerful company, those hundred knights of his!

Four squires came out from Gavarret's ranks, picked up his body, and bore it to the pavilion.

For Marlatz there was no hesitation; he knew what he desired to do, and, in spite of the two wounds that were sapping the blood from him, he struggled into his saddle and, erect and determined

as ever, rode over to the gallery where the women huddled panic-stricken.

Dismounting, he stood with bared head in front of Alazais. They looked straight into each other's eyes, like two who are not ashamed — who have nothing to regret.

"My lady," said the Baron of Arc, simply, "I fought him fair."

"My lord," she said, "your shield is untarnished, your hands are clean. I have no reproaches for you. I do but ask one favor of your chivalry: go no further, let there be no more bloodshed here at Gavarret. There be true knights amongst those," and she waved her hand toward Gavarret's restless followers.

"Thy will shall be accomplished," answered the Baron of Arc.

He saluted her, remounted, and rode back to his men. At a word from him each of his hundred knights took his lance from his stirrup and let it fall to the ground, a hundred falling as one. Then they wheeled

and rode slowly along the lists and out on the bridle-path that led to the castle. Gavarret's ranks opened to let them through, and Gavarret's men could have butchered them had they so desired. But they went unarmed and unmolested, chains clanking, plumes nodding, the noon sun gilding their mail. And Marlatz, indomitable, rode at their head.

XI

THE HERO SHALL AID THE HEROINE

IT is hard to kill a snake. Gavarret, helpless on his bed, lay unconscious for a day and a night. At times, so faint was his pulse, they thought him dead. Then delirium set in and he tossed and moaned and cursed, rolling his red eyes like a man undergoing tortures of hell.

The Monk of Béziers attended him, for the Monk was supposed to know all the secrets of every science. But the more they bled him the weaker, to their naïve surprise, did he become. Death in its black castle, portcullis raised and drawbridge down, was awaiting him who had tarnished his shield with dishonor.

The morning following the ill-starred tournament, in a bleak drizzling dawn, Mar-

latz rode out of Gavarret at the head of his knights. Alazais watched him from her window. They went solemnly enough, no trumpeting, no gayety, but they went proudly and confidently as ever, satisfied that they had borne themselves well. In the mist and rain and the yellow morning light they loomed up in the courtyard like a hundred spectre horsemen. Marlatz himself was the last to appear, his sable armor gleaming like jet in the dampness. A rattle and splash of hoofs in the puddles of the paved court, the gates were swung, grinding, for them, and they were off.

As they passed the outer gate Marlatz turned in his saddle and, since his left arm was lashed to his side, dropped the reins from his right hand and flourished a farewell. Alazais replied with a wave of her white scarf. It was the first time she had not rejoiced at his departure from Gavarret.

She followed the little company with her eyes as they circled down the cliff-road

into the fog-choked valley below. Only when they were out of sight did she turn from the window with a sigh at her lips.

"There went a man," she said.

Meanwhile she had not been able to bring herself to look at her dying husband (for they assured her that he *was* dying), nor would she permit Aimar to come to her. She tolerated the presence only of Guillerma, her two maids (Stazailla and Biatritz), and the Monk of Béziers.

The castle was subdued and gloomy as if it housed a corpse. People walked on tiptoe and talked in whispers, and no one ventured to laugh lest they be accused of unbecoming cheerfulness. And the skies of Provence wept with the house of Gavarret.

One day the Monk of Béziers, fresh from the sick-room, sought out Aimar in his chamber. He found him morbidly watching the rain-drops zigzag down his window-pane. The garden outside was, for the time, a sodden, crumpled ruin; the

fountain an impudence, an insult to the elements.

"Ha," said the Monk, who was now ever alone in his good humor; "what delicate fancy occupies your mind to-day, my boy?"

Aimar turned and answered gravely: "I was devising a Death Song for the Count of Gavarret."

The Monk smiled.

"Discard it," he said, "'til it be needed. Gavarret, if ever man did, deserves to die; but I fear me he will live to plan more evil before the devil claim him."

"Ah," said Aimar listlessly, "what excellent news!"

"You think so? I hold it the reverse."

"But 'twas you that saved him!" said Aimar, surprised.

"Quite true — my skill as a physician was at stake. Pride often spurs where the heart would hold back. Howbeit I should not grudge him life did his venomous disposition but show sign of improvement.

But the fever has burnt out none of the rancor in his brain. He remains querulous, impotently wrathful, and what time he devotes not to cursing Marlatz (which is little) he divides between you and his Lady Alazias, both of whom he accuses of lying and deceit. Bah! It sickens me to hear the man. I feel unclean — fouled by the pest-house of his brain!"

The Monk spat on the floor (those were crude days) and paced impatiently the length of the room.

"My Death Song will be useless, then," said Aimar, with some regret. "'Tis a pity, for I had found some happy rhymes."

"Poets are ever egoists," answered the Monk. "Come, forget your Death Song. Accompany me down to the village where we can talk to folk that are healthy-minded. This castle chills me like a tomb."

"Would you go in the storm?"

"I would. 'Tis the more purifying."

Aimar booted and cloaked himself, while

the Monk tucked up his robe to his knees, displaying a well-rounded pair of legs in coarse white stockings. He substituted leather shoes for his light slippers, and they set out.

At the outer gate the wind caught them and sent them reeling, and the rain lashed their faces like a whip.

"Heu!" cried the Monk, "that is good tonic!"

They steadied themselves at the rocky parapet that kept the road from tumbling over the cliff, and looked into the valley below them. There, sheltered from the wind, the fog lay so dense that they could imagine themselves standing high on the precipitous shore of a boundless white sea. In the foreground some of the taller trees pushed their heads through the swirling mist like suppliant arms of drowning men. Of the town of Gavarret they could discern naught.

They pressed on, the wind abating with their descent; and Aimar found the cor-

pulent Monk a good shield to have in front of him. When at length they reached a part of the road so sheltered that they could make their voices heard without bellowing, the Monk paused for breath. His face was glowing with color, and the dampness shone on it like drops of sweat.

"There is satisfaction," he said, "on a day such as this, in defying wind and rain and fog. I always feel myself more of a man when I have covered a mile or two in the teeth of all that Nature can do to prevent me. This successful battling with the elements fills me with a tingle of victory and I feel like crying aloud: 'Behold, ye weaklings, behold a very ox of a man! Is he not magnificent? He has come three miles through this storm and is as fresh as when he started. Bow your heads before him and sing Hosanna!'"

Aimar did not appear so enthusiastic. The Monk regarded him with a smile.

"I fear me," he said, "you like better four walls and a roof on such a day. 'Rain,'

to your ear, rhymes with 'pain,' I warrant, and 'wind' with 'unkind!'"

Aimar answered not. He appeared to be listening to something far off in the mists.

"Heard you not a call?" he said — "a call for help?"

"Nay," answered the Monk, after an interval, "I hear nothing."

They started on again; but the troubadour had at least one deaf ear for Matfre's discourse. The good Monk, however, not being of those who need a listener in order to utter their thoughts, talked pleasantly on.

He lauded the storm and from that entered upon a learned explanation of the causes of thunder and lightning. Lightning, he claimed, was kindled as one would kindle a spark from flint and steel, only in this case it was the striking together of hot vapor and cold vapor that produced the flash. As for thunder, that was equally simple to understand if one were an earnest

student and had developed highly the faculties of comprehension.

"The clouds, you must know, are huge bladders, varying in color from the white, fair-weather clouds to the black storm-clouds. They are inflated with air, some, as you will have noticed, more than others, and they are driven about lightly by the fickle winds. Now, during great storms the air within them is greatly harassed and is buffeted about unmercifully. Finally comes a wind that slaps it overhard, and with a mighty rending the bladder bursts apart — thus," and the Monk illustrated a thunderclap with the aid of arms and lungs. It was wondrously realistic.

"Hush," said Aimar, "I heard it again."

"Heard what again?" asked the Monk, still rumbling distantly.

"The voice calling."

"Ah," said the Monk, "why do you not keep quiet, then, and listen?"

They listened, and now they both heard, distinctly and near at hand, a woman's

voice — or was it a child's? — crying persistently but, it seemed, wearily: "Help! Please help! Help! Please help!"

At this point Aimar displayed the greater agility of the two. He was twenty yards down the road before the other had got himself fairly in motion.

"He runs better than he walks," observed the Monk, following on at a clumsy trot.

A few yards more and Aimar stopped to listen, and then plunged off the road into the undergrowth.

In the doubtful shelter of a dripping plane-tree, her head drooping against its sodden trunk, sat a young girl nursing a bare, swollen ankle. At Aimar's arrival she was chafing it listlessly in a vain endeavor to restore the circulation, and her face, being thus lowered, was hidden by strands of heavy black hair on which raindrops gleamed like diamonds. At sound of Aimar's step she looked up and met his eyes.

"Mascarose!" he cried, and gave thanks to the Virgin and all the saints.

She appeared no less pleased than he, but she took the encounter less as a divine manifestation than as a happy coincidence.

"It is Aimar," she said; "I am very glad."

Forgetting rain and wind and weather, he was on his knees beside her.

"Mascarose!" He caressed the name. "Mary, Queen of Heaven, has looked with pity on my grief and has guided me to you once again with her ever-merciful hand."

"I have hurt my ankle," said Mascarose, a pathetic quiver at her lips.

Aimar was all for curing it with kisses, but at that instant the Monk of Béziers thrust his round head between them, panting and talking simultaneously to the detriment of both.

"What have we here!" he gasped. "A lamb strayed from the fold?" And then, sighting her injured ankle: "Ah, Mascarose, my poor child!"

He felt it expertly, and with fingers as gentle as a woman's.

"Do not think to walk on it," he said, after a minute. "Does it pain you much?"

"Yes, Father Matfre!"

"I will carry you in my arms," volunteered Aimar.

"How far do you go?" queried the Monk.

"What matter!" Aimar exclaimed. "I will bear you to the end of the earth and find the road overshort."

"Nay," said she gravely, "it is not that far. I go but to the Inn of the Golden Cross, where my father will meet me and take me home. Euclid will be with him, no doubt."

"Who may this Euclid be?" inquired Aimar sharply.

"The donkey," she answered, opening wide eyes at him.

Aimar sighed his relief. He had the making of a jealous lover.

"In that case," said the Monk with a

smile, "we will undertake to get you to the Inn of the Golden Cross as quickly as may be. Aimar, since you possess the strength of inspiration, do you carry her the first part of the way, and should your inspiration fail, I shall be there to relieve you. Pick her up gently, now. There!"

"My slipper," said Mascarose from Aimar's arms; "do not forget to bring my slipper, Father Matfre!"

The Monk lifted the six inches of cloth from the wet grass, regarded it with curiosity, and smiled. She smiled back at him over Aimar's shoulder.

"It caused my fall," she explained, much as Eve, in the garden, might have blamed the serpent.

"My feet are not used to them yet," she continued, "and then, they are overlarge and often they came off. And once, when one of them was neither on nor off, but betwixt the two, my ankle turned and I fell."

"*Mea culpa,*" said the Monk, sorrow-

fully. "'Twas I that besought you to wear them."

"Yes," she agreed. "I have done all that you asked except the stockings. My legs, you see, are still bare."

"Hush, sweetheart," said Aimar.

Loosening her arms from about his neck, she brought her head around to regard him.

"Must I be quiet?" she asked humbly.

Aimar gave no answer, but pressed her closer to him in his arms; and she smiled back at him contentedly, let her head rest on his shoulder, and closed her eyes.

So beautiful was she that he scarce dared to look on her.

The fever from her ankle had lent a slight flush to the oval of her face, and her red lips were parted slightly with her breathing. Where her hair waved tenderly away from her forehead and temples the dampness had picked out delicate strands that clung caressingly to her cheeks. The mist sparkled in her long lashes like

tears. He could feel her breast rise and fall against his with every quiet breath that she drew, and oh, the fragrance of her!

Reverently he bent and touched his lips to her forehead. It was to him as a sacrament.

The Monk plodded along behind them, splashing quietly and contentedly through the puddles, pleased that another was happy.

"Love maketh the back strong," he reflected. "My burdens this day will be none but mental."

And so they three came through the rain to the Inn of the Golden Cross.

XII

THE HERO SHALL DECLARE HIS LOVE

THE landlord, who knew the Monk of Béziers well, having ministered often to his gigantic thirst, came forth bare-headed to the door to welcome them.

"Ha, my friend Rogier," cried the Monk; "we bring here a lady in distress. Mascarose is her name. She is doubtless known to you, and as favorably as she is to us. Nothing less than a secluded chamber will do, for we cannot have the ruffians that you fill up with your wine feasting on her beauty with their dissolute eyes. Give us the best that you have — 'twill be none too good."

The landlord bowed low.

"I fear you must pass through the hall to gain the stairs," he said. "And the

hall is filled with many who have been drinking to keep the dampness out of their bones. As you say, Father Matfre, they are like to stare, if they do no worse. But I will lead the way, and do you and this gentleman who bears the lady slip through after me as quickly as may be. Thus may we pass unobserved."

"It sickens me," said the Monk, "how that men in these days cannot look on a maid with decency."

"Has my father not yet come?" asked Mascarose, looking up and brushing the hair back from her face.

Rogier, the landlord, shook his head, adding that her father would doubtless stop, as was his custom, an hour before supper.

"Fear not," whispered Aimar to her, "we will care for you."

So they followed Rogier through the entrance into the crowded hall. It was well filled, and many of its occupants were drunk. They were stumbling about in

their stocking feet, having placed their wet leather boots in a line to dry in front of the roaring fire. That the drying was being accomplished was evident from the steam that rose from them, filling the room with a stifling odor of burnt leather.

Aimar, with Mascarose in his arms, followed directly behind the landlord, and after him came the Monk. It seemed for an instant, so unexpected was their entrance and so rapid their passage, that they would reach the stairs unmolested; indeed, Rogier already had a foot on the first step before there arrived any interference.

A slouching guardsman, heated with wine, suddenly realized that an uncommonly beautiful maiden was being carried through the hall. It occurred to his drunken brain that his permission had not been obtained (he had newly arrived at a captaincy) and that he had not been vouchsafed a close enough look at her face.

"I see well enough that her lips are red,"

he declared thickly; "it remains but to discover if her eyes be bright." And he poked an uncertain finger under the child's rounded chin.

To Aimar it was as though he had profaned the Madonna. The blood rushed up into his head like a flame and his upper lip curled back from his teeth. It was the first time in his life that anger had completely mastered him. Like a flash he shifted his hold on Mascarose in such a manner that he might support her with his right arm, and his left hand shot out, doubled up in a knot, straight and hard, full to the other's jaw. The guardsman grunted and went down in a heap, and before any one could intervene Aimar had Mascarose safely up the stairs.

There might have been more trouble had not the Monk, who valiantly defended the rear, spoken out with no ecclesiastical ambiguity.

"By the souls of the saints," he bellowed, "if one of you unclean swine so

much as move I will put the curse of the Church on the entire herd and send your black souls damned to perdition!"

Though informal, it was not without effect.

"Admirable!" cried the landlord, pleased that visitors in high favor at the castle should escape unscathed in his house.

The excellent Monk, with a last quelling glance over the room, followed his companions up the narrow stairs.

They laid Mascarose carefully on a bed and the Monk bathed her foot in hot water while Aimar, quite unnecessarily, stroked her two little brown hands. When bandages had been applied the Monk rose and pronounced his work complete.

The girl regarded him gratefully.

"Father Matfre," she said seriously, "you are so kind that I sometimes think your heart is as big as your — your waist."

The Monk rocked with laughter.

"Mark the child's delicacy," he cried.

"Some one has taught her not to say 'stomach'!"

Mascarose blushed furiously.

"I meant stomach," she said contritely.

"Of course you did and, large as it is, I go below to fill it. That merry band downstairs will have forgotten their little upset by now, and soldiers make not bad table companions. Hail and farewell!"

They two, left together, were silent for a time, finding wondrous satisfaction in the simple fact of their being together. Then, with the glorious directness of youth, they plunged into the midst of things. No need for them to retrace their steps painfully, one by one, back to their first meeting by the hawthorn-hedge. Each of them knew instinctively that the other had every word, every gesture of that sweet moment graven deep in the tablets of the memory. No need, either, for them to recount the incidents of their daily lives since then. The past held no interest for them; the present, even, was of but transitory impor-

tance, essential only as being a stepping-stone to the future — the future wherein lay the consecration of their love.

"Aimar," said Mascarose at length, opening her eyes, "I have learned what is a lute."

"And I have forgotten," replied he bitterly.

"You have forgotten?"

"Yes, I have sinned and may sing no more until my sin be forgiven me."

"And will the Blessed Virgin not absolve you of your sin?" she asked, wondering. "Have you spoken of this to Father Matfre?"

"'Tis but you may cleanse me of it," he answered, bowing his head.

"I?" she echoed. "Then you have sinned against me?"

Aimar nodded in assent.

"I denied my love," he whispered, and went to his knees by the bed.

She reflected a space.

"That, of course," she said, "was very wrong."

"'Twas monstrous — intolerable."

"But you do earnestly repent?"

"I have lived since but for you and by the thought of you! Ah, my heart has been filled with you — with all of you — with your eyes and the wonder of them, with your lips and the fulness of them, with your hair and the fragrance of it. I have passed daylight hours visioning the curve of your throat, and in my dreams I have clasped your slim hands in mine and reverenced them with kisses. You are to me life and the reward for living; you are all the songs that have been sung since the beginning of the world; you are the fabric woven by man's noblest thoughts and woman's purest prayers. And yet you are vital, throbbing, living — divinity treading the earth; and I, my God, I denied you! Can such sin as this be forgiven?"

He took her two hands and pressed them passionately to his breast. And looking far into her eyes for his answer, he saw in their depths a miracle being wrought;

saw them fill with that mystical light that heralds the first white dawn of love. The spoken word was vain; he knew himself forgiven.

"My love, my own sweet love, my Mascarose!" he whispered, and felt very humble and unworthy as he knelt beside her.

"I love thee," she answered gently, "I love thee."

He kissed her as he might have kissed his crucifix.

If they were silent, then, for a while, it was because their thoughts were nearer to heaven than words have ever reached. To every one is given sometime a moment in which the spiritual in him so triumphs over the material that his soul seems almost to shake off the body of clay that weights it to the earth. These are called the great moments in our lives, and it is in these great moments that a nation is won, a faith is restored, a love is sanctified.

They were reminded that they were still of the earth, earthy, by the sound of feet in the hall followed by a discreet knocking at the door. It was the Monk.

"Smile on me, my children," he said, "for I am the bearer of good news. Wisdom astride of Euclid is approaching as fast as Euclid's pace will permit. Yes, my child, 'tis your father that has been sighted riding his donkey down the road, some two-score yards away. If he be not delayed Euclid should make the distance well within the hour. Look, you can see him from the window."

They looked as they were bidden and, in truth, not far from the inn they saw a small donkey picking his way with studied leisure through the shining puddles of the road. Astride his back, oblivious apparently to the driving rain, was the old, gray-bearded man, the father of Mascarose. He was wrapped in a brown cloak, frayed and storm-beaten, and his head was cov-

ered with a hood, not unlike a monk's cowl. So long were his legs that his toes, at times during the progress, dragged the road with marked injury to his pointed shoes. Across his pommel, and secured to it precariously by a twist of the reins, lay a heavy staff; and he held in his two hands, shielding it as best he might, a large, dilapidated volume to which he was devoting all of his attention.

Euclid, the donkey, turned in at the gate of his own volition and came to a full stop before the door. Then, and not until then, did his master raise his eyes.

His gaze wandered vaguely about the court, as though he was trying to recall whither he had come and why. His eye finally resting on the golden cross suspended over the door of the inn, he nodded his head in recognition, closed his book reluctantly and with infinite care, and stepped awkwardly from his saddle to the ground.

Soon they heard his voice in the hall re-

plying at random to the landlord's elaborate explanation. The Monk of Béziers opened the door for him and bade him enter.

"Most learned and venerable Elias," said the Monk, "we have your daughter here with us under our care. She awaits you with impatience."

"My daughter?" echoed the old man. "Ah, yes, that would be Mascarose. What does she here?"

"She rests with a twisted ankle," explained the Monk. "That is she on the bed."

"Truly," said Elias, approaching, "that is she — that is Mascarose."

"'Tis indeed I," said she, smiling. "Do you not remember, father, that you were to meet me at the inn?"

"And is this not the inn?" he ventured cautiously.

They assured him that it was.

"Why, then," he continued, obviously much relieved, "why, then, everything is

well. We have but to thank these kind gentlemen, whom I have not the pleasure of knowing, and get home."

The Monk stepped forward.

"I am Matfre, Monk of Béziers," he volunteered. "This young man they call Aimar. He is a troubadour by profession."

"I am very glad," replied the old man. "A monk and a troubadour — both honorable trades. One rejoiceth the soul and the other the heart. As for me, I am Elias, a humble scholar who strives to rejoice the mind."

"Thus," said the Monk, "we are a worthy three — nay, a worthy four, since you may call me no judge if Mascarose does not rejoice the eyes."

"She is pleasant to the sight," admitted Elias gravely; "but in my quality of geometrician I deal principally with straight lines and angles. They have become to my eyes symbols of beauty and I fear she has none of them."

"A most unsatisfactory daughter," said the Monk, twinkling.

"Nay," replied the scholar, "I say not so. Doubtless when I take up, in my studies, the properties of spheroids I shall find her more in keeping with my sense of the beautiful."

Mascarose, for whom the conversation must have lacked interest, now interrupted to remind her father that the road they had to go was long and the gait of Euclid, the donkey, not overfast. Elias agreed that a hasty departure was imperative. "The more so," he added, "as I have been unable to convince Euclid that a straight line is the shortest distance between two points."

The donkey was brought to the door and they placed Mascarose on his back. Aimar, who again bore her in his arms, had but time to whisper a word in her ear.

"I love thee. I shall love thee till the end of time."

"My dear heart," she answered softly.

"I will come for you soon — I will seek

you through the woods, and love shall lead me to you."

"I will be ready," she whispered.

They said farewell. The old man, grasping his staff in one hand and his book in the other, led the way out of the courtyard. The donkey followed patiently with Mascarose on his back, and Aimar and the Monk stood in the rain and watched them go.

When they had turned the corner of the gate the Monk shivered and drew his robe closely about him.

"'Tis bitter cold, here in the wet," he exclaimed.

"You are mad," answered Aimar; "it is the fairest day of the year."

XIII

THERE SHALL BE SHAMEFUL INJUSTICE

IN a fortnight, toward the middle of the month of May, the Count of Gavarret was up and about the castle, as sound in body as ever, and more evil-tempered. Not his the humility that comes from a *tête-à-tête* with Death; not his the grateful heart of one restored to health and vigor. Irritable he was, and morose, complaining of all things, from the conduct of his wife to the vileness of the cooking.

Especially he nursed a grudge toward Aimar, and the troubadour giving him no further occasion for vexation, the grudge, through long nursing, waxed heartier and stronger as the days went by. Aimar had been at the pool with Alazais that unfortunate night; Aimar had witnessed the Count's discomfiture and the ignominy that

Marlatz had put upon him; Aimar, therefore, was unacceptable at the Castle of Gavarret. But how to be rid of him?

Many dark designs presented themselves and were discarded, one after the other, as being too obviously malicious. Two weeks had passed before certain information was brought to his ears which caused him to rub his big, hairy hands together in great satisfaction. Aimar, it seemed, had been observed in front of the Inn of the Golden Cross holding lengthy converse with a certain Elias, a wild old man who was known to be in league with the devil and to deal cunningly in all branches of sorcery, witchcraft, and black magic. With Elias had been his daughter, Mascarose, a girl endowed with the devil's own graces. Her Gavarret remembered well and agreed that the beauty of her was ungodly. Also, it appeared, there had been a person dressed as a monk (one of the devil's most widely known disguises), and an evil-eyed donkey. Evidence enough, in truth.

Aimar, summoned before Gavarret in the great hall, found him seated in his chair of state in high dignity. The formalities of a trial were to be observed; the accused to be given a public hearing, witnesses to be duly called, and, when all the farce had been enacted, Gavarret was to dispense justice from his high seat. Now, Gavarret's ideas of what constituted justice were well known throughout the province, and the days he held court, though fast days for the accused, were, you may be sure, feast days for the spectators. Public floggings and public hangings have ever been eagerly witnessed by civilized man.

It was the Monk of Béziers who came to accompany Aimar to the tribunal. Briefly he explained the circumstance.

"Gavarret is in an ugly mood," he said, "and I can but warn you to look for scant justice. Keep a stiff lip, but answer him softly and I will do what I may in your behalf. I fear, however, that you will be shown the door of the castle and made to

use it. 'Tis by no means the most severe of the penalties that he is wont to inflict."

"Were it not," answered Aimar, "that leaving Gavarret meant leaving you and other good friends, I should have few regrets. As you know, when the heart is already without the walls the body follows not unwillingly. As for the Count of Gavarret, I fear him not."

"'Tis well spoken!" cried the Monk, slapping him soundly on the back. "I like the blood in you."

So when Aimar came into the hall his head was high and his eyes showed no sign of flinching. He passed slowly before a line of guardsmen, drawn up by the door, and took his place directly in front of the dais on which sat Gavarret with Alazais at his left hand. The Monk of Béziers stood behind Gavarret's right shoulder.

Save for an open half-circle about the dais the hall was crowded to suffocation with knights and ladies, squires, serving-

men, pages, girls-in-waiting — all the personnel of the castle, in short, and many curiosity-seekers from the town.

There were two trembling wretches accused of sheep-stealing to be disposed of first, and Gavarret made short work of them. Twenty strokes of the whip on each of their bared backs, and if they were caught a second time at the same work, why, then, by God, they should hang for it.

Next they led forward a sullen-faced brute whom they accused of murdering his neighbor. They had caught him while his knife was still wet with the victim's blood. Gavarret, bending dark brows upon him, commanded him to speak up if he had aught to say.

"Why should I speak?" he demanded doggedly. "You will not listen; or, if you listen, you will not believe me. Better hang than waste my breath pleading for justice here."

"If the justice you receive at Gavarret suits you not," cried the Count in a fury,

"you can look for better in hell. Take him out and hang him high."

A murmur arose but subsided instantly under Gavarret's frown. Although coming to hate him, they feared him still.

Two guardsmen led the condemned man from the hall. He went quietly enough, a brave man facing the inevitable; but to know, in his heart, that he was innocent of the crime they had laid at his door, helped him not; nor did it help him to know it was but sheep's blood that had stained his knife. He would hang none the lower because of that.

Gavarret now turned his judicial mind to Aimar's case. He addressed the hall with great unction.

"It is not without sorrow," he said, "that we are forced to listen to accusations against one whom we have taken so intimately into our castle, who has eaten of our bread, who has drunk of our wine, whom we have clothed and whom we have sheltered; and were not the charges against

him of so grave a nature and their truth so unmistakable we would, indeed, refuse to sit here as his judge."

Thus, smoothly, he condemned before trial and cleared his skirts at the same time.

Witnesses, a soldier and a ploughboy, trembling at the importance thrust upon them, testified that Aimar had at the Inn of the Golden Cross been seen to hold friendly converse with one Elias, an associate of the devil, and with his daughter, whom people called a witch. In their company was one dressed as a monk, so closely cowled they had been unable to look on his face. Their testimony was greatly strengthened by the frequency and sincerity with which they crossed themselves. Sympathy and approval were with them.

There followed, however, a short period of uncertainty when the Monk of Béziers stepped boldly forward and admitted frankly to being the mysterious monk in question.

"Poor, simple-minded dolts that ye are," he concluded heartily, "this lad Aimar is no more guilty than I am; and he who says I deal with witches and folk who practise sorcery and black magic, puts an insult on the Church of God through me, one of its representatives, however humble. If your simple minds dwelt not so constantly on the devil and his works, your souls would have more chance for salvation. I fear me you see Satan's hand more often than that of God."

A murmur of applause, while the witnesses appeared greatly crest-fallen. They felt, and not without reason, that their good faith had been taken amiss. Alazais, it was noticed, smiled approval.

At this point Gavarret displayed his cunning. Turning to the Monk, he bowed to him graciously as though thanking him for his opinion, and said quietly: "We have listened with interest to the remarks of our esteemed and valued friend, Father Matfre. So holy a man as he may with

safety consort with the Evil One himself and remain, despite it, spotless as before. For, as he says himself, is he not our Lord's representative on earth? Nay, even, I doubt not but that such association would be more to the betterment of the devil than to the injury of the spotless soul of Father Matfre. But, alas, all of us are not so invulnerable, and 'tis only the truly pure that may look on evil without harm, since Satan's spears can find ready entrance except where the armor of innocence be complete.

"Hence we are forced, though with regret, to continue the hearing against Aimar, the troubadour, and to maintain that he has associated with evil to the detriment of his virtue and to the danger of such persons as are in daily contact with him. Aimar of Blaye, if you have aught to say in disproof of these charges, speak. Our minds are open to reason and our hearts are in no way set against you. We desire the truth."

"And the truth you shall have," replied

Aimar. "I deny not that I held converse with Elias and with his daughter at the Inn of the Golden Cross — yea, under the very symbol of the cross, which is rightly supposed to be shunned by the devil. I do deny, and take my oath to the denial, that either Elias or his daughter have aught in common with the Evil One. Were all others as innocent and as God-fearing as they the world would be a cleaner, sweeter spot to live in. If I have sinned through being in their company, I can but pray God that it be permitted me never to cease from sinning!"

A murmur of dismay ran through the hall. Gavarret heard it and was pleased.

"Aimar," he said, with a fair imitation of compassion in his voice, "'tis plain that already the devil's power is working within you. Such blasphemy as yours has not been heard within these walls, and I tremble lest God strike us all down in His wrath. You admit your guilt, and, by rejoicing in it, you compel us to take measures more

severe than is our wont. Aimar of Blaye, we purpose to scourge you from the castle, and we do earnestly and devoutly pray that every blow you do receive may reach the evil spirit within you and thus aid in accomplishing the cleansing of your soul. We listen, in mercy, to any final words you choose to speak."

He paused, waiting for Aimar to reply, and the hall held its breath in expectancy. The Monk of Béziers leaned over his shoulder.

"'Tis no justice, my lord Gavarret," he remonstrated in his ear.

"I am the judge," replied Gavarret between his teeth.

"Take heed, then, lest you be judged as mercilessly as you judge," said Alazais. "The day will come, my lord, when your cruelty will be repaid you."

Gavarret motioned them both back with a wave of his hand.

"I ask no counsel either from a woman or from a monk," he answered, plainly

enough, and turned to give ear to Aimar's defence.

"Count of Gavarret," said the troubadour slowly, "I have said my say and you have pronounced sentence on me. It is not in my mind to ask for mercy where none exists, nor even to demand justice. One does not look for water in a desert. I came to your castle a free man with no master save myself, and no mistress save her God made me serve — my elusive Lady of Song. I found your castle grim, lifeless, loveless, and it was in my heart to throw wide open its darkened windows so that, perchance, a little sunlight might steal in to brighten and cleanse its dismal halls. My trade is to gladden hearts weighted down, to turn sorrow to joy and tears to smiles, to brush away the cobwebs of melancholy that too often cling to the soul. I have asked no rewards beyond those that nature herself reveals to me if my labor be successful. My recompense is a glimpse of the light kindled in a lover's eyes, or a

flush on a cheek as a fleeting token that the heart is not yet withered. Like the true physician my pleasure lies in watching life conquer death and love cast out pain. I am, indeed, physician to the heart; and if my potions hold nothing of good or if skill in ministering them be lacking, why, then the heart must die, dismally stifled. It would seem that such has been the case at Gavarret. According to all visible signs I have proven a poor physician, for, behold, there is little evidence here of life or of happiness or of love. It appears that I leave the castle as sick as I found it. But I am audacious enough to believe that, far beneath the surface, and, mayhap, skilfully concealed, there are pulses that are beating faster and there are hearts that are the lighter for having listened to my poor songs; yea, I am audacious enough to believe that I have sowed the seeds of life and of love here in your grim castle of Gavarret. My lord, I bow to your sentence the less regretfully for the assurance

I have that these seeds will thrive, and that, even though it be long after my departure, there will come the time when life and love, like spring's roses, shall bloom scarlet at Gavarret. If that time shall come I shall not have sung in vain."

The Count listened, restless, pulling at his black beard.

"You speak smoothly," he sneered when Aimar had ceased, "you speak as smoothly as the devil himself. You say that you have sowed the seeds of life and of love in my castle — in my grim castle, you call it, do you not? — but I and others will tell you that you have sowed but the seeds of discord and of jealousy. What passions you have aroused have been evil ones; the love you have created has been impure, and the life which you boast you have instilled — bah! I have run too close to death to listen to you."

"That, my lord," answered Aimar, "was of your own doing. Moreover, I spoke not of the life of the body, but of the life of the soul."

"Enough — I have listened to your phrases until my ears are sick with them. Go juggle your words elsewhere; whisper them, if you will, in the ears of your woman, the comely daughter of Elias —"

"Stop," cried Aimar, "or, by the living God, I will finish what Marlatz left undone and kill you in your chair."

Gavarret laughed contemptuously and turned to his captain.

"Put this whelp out of Gavarret and be not overgentle. The blows you deal him will be so many blows dealt to the devil, and will be credited to you in heaven. Give him the flat sides of your swords with a *Te Deum* or a *Gloria Patri*, and if your Latin be weak let your arms be strong. Take him away."

At a command the line of guardsmen closed in about Aimar. Gavarret watched them with a sneer and a smile; but Alazais stood up and, so plainly that many near the dais heard her, said: "Peire of Gavarret, I should count myself as vile as you, did

I stay to witness your work." And she walked from the hall with her two women-in-waiting.

"My lord," declared the Monk of Béziers, "you are making a grave mistake. If you must send the boy away, let him go peacefully. There are many here who love him, and I am one. You will gain nothing but hate by this action, and, by Heaven, you will deserve what you gain."

"Peace," commanded Gavarret; "if you are so soft-hearted leave the hall with the women; for he appears to have won the sympathy of you and all other wearers of petticoats."

But Aimar had more friends than Gavarret credited him with; nor were they all women. Nearly a score, unwilling to witness shameful injustice, followed Alazais from the hall; and with them went Savaric and Ermengarda (she frankly weeping) and Guillerma, and Ugo the page, and, finally, the Monk of Béziers, rubbing the tears from his eyes with the back of his

hand. Never had people seen him so sorrowful.

This demonstration of sympathy may have had its effect on Gavarret; for he motioned to the captain of the guards and said in a low voice: "Take him out quietly as far as the outer gate. Then once you are on the road to the town, scourge the evil spirit out of his body with whatever weapons are most convenient. Only there must be no killing, you understand. 'Twould be poor policy at the present time."

Thereupon Aimar, a guardsman at each arm and a dozen surrounding him, was led from the hall to the outer gate and away from the Castle of Gavarret. He went quietly, without a word and without fear. At the gate his escort drew their swords and flayed his body with the sides of them until he dropped exhausted and bleeding to his knees, and thence to the ground. They carried him, limp, a mile down the road and tossed him carelessly behind a

hedge. He fell in a huddled heap and lay still; but they knew by his breathing that he was not dead and so, their work accomplished, they returned to the castle.

XIV

THE HEROINE SHALL AID THE HERO

IT was twilight when Aimar stirred and opened his eyes. For a space he lay quiet, trying to steady his reeling brain. Consciousness came gropingly and painfully, and recollection whirled fitful in his head as wind-driven snow.

His clothing, slashed into strips, and stiff with blood about his back and shoulders, clung to him irritatingly, rendering painful his least movement; and in his head burned high fever, hammering at his temples like blows on an anvil. Above him, in a fading sky, rocked a dozen pale stars.

After a time, his will reasserting itself, he got dizzily to his feet. Sick and faint he clung, swaying, to a tree-branch, while the world went black, and his ears rang as

with the singing of falling water. This passed gradually, and he raised his head from his hands.

"My God," he moaned, "if I could but think!"

But his prayer remaining unanswered, the fever continued to distort and confuse the thoughts that ran fluttering and writhing through his brain. Flashes of memory came to him only to be obscured by clouds of dim oblivion. With arms outstretched to ward off what might be in his way, he staggered, half-blind, on into the forest, leaving further behind him with every step the road and the chance of shelter.

Once he tripped and fell flat on his face. The relief of lying still for an instant was greater than the pain of his fall, and it was with intense regret that he regained his feet and resumed the torture of movement. God knows what vague instinct kept him at it.

And then, ahead of him and somewhat to his right, he heard the murmur of

running water. When he reached it he was crying and babbling like a child. He could not drink enough. He buried his face in it; he ran his hands through it; he opened his mouth wide and let it flood his throat. Blessed Lord, the coolness of it!

As he lay beside the brook, drowsy with fever, muttering delirious phrases, snatches of prayers, and fragments of songs, there came to his ears the sound of two voices — a girl's and a man's.

"The hypothenuse," the man was saying, "would then have a length of four hundred and eighty yards and a half. Divide by two and find me the root."

A pause and then, "Fifteen and one-half," answered the girl.

"Then, the triangle being isosceles, each leg is fifteen and one-half yards in length. Good! You understand? Now demonstrate to me that two triangles are equal if they have a side and the two adjacent angles in common."

While the girl repeated the demonstration, interrupted at intervals by the man's correction or approval, Aimar listened in a daze.

"I am gone mad," he said aloud, "for I do not comprehend spoken words. Perhaps, however, I do but dream. I will shout to them and then if they come not I shall know it to be but a delirious fancy."

But shouting demanded effort and he had not the will to exert himself. He felt very tired; it would be good to close his eyes and sleep. His brain, he was certain, needed rest, for he could not arrange his thoughts. If the hammering would but cease in the back of his head — not only in his head, now, but all through his body. His frame was being racked with it. He wondered if the sparks that flashed behind his hot eyelids were not caused by that incessant hammering. And who was it that plied the hammer? Ah, now he could see his face. It was a bearded face,

contorted in a sneer. And the eyes were fire-red. Of course he knew the face — it was Peire of Gavarret. . . .

With a choking cry he staggered again to his feet.

Mascarose and Elias, the scholar, in the midst of a theorem out of Euclid, were interrupted by the sound of some one crashing through the underbrush that surrounded the clearing in front of their hut. It was now well-nigh dark, and, since there was no moon, their only light came from the hearth-fire that glowed and dimmed fantastically through the open door into the night. While they waited uneasily there staggered into this radius of light the ghastly figure of a man, his arms stretched above his head, his fingers clutching wildly at the empty air. Dry blood stained his face, and his slashed garments were red with it. His eyes burned wild with fever.

Mascarose knew it was he before the fire-light caught him. She made no cry,

but her heart was running wild. She thought him dying.

"Lord God, who hath brought him to me," she whispered, "take him not from me now!"

She was at his side, her arms about him. As she drew his head to her shoulder he felt her cheek cool against his.

"Aimar!" she breathed, and in the word was all the soul of her.

He turned his eyes to hers, and for an instant the fever died out of them. His lips tried to smile.

"Mascarose," he said weakly, "I have come to you. Will you take me in?" And he fell, a dead weight, in her arms.

With the help of Elias she got him into the cabin, and laid him on her own bed.

"I have seen him before," said Elias when he had wiped the blood from Aimar's face.

"Yes, father," she answered; "at the Inn of the Golden Cross."

"Ah, perhaps; I do not remember. He seems very ailing. I wonder, is he dead?"

Mascarose cried out and went white at the word. Her father looked at her in mild wonder. Then he laid his hand first on Aimar's heart and then on his forehead.

"Nay," he said, "he lives. But he has a fever and should be bled."

"Bled!" she cried, and pointed to the deep crimson stains on his clothing.

They cut away the strips of cloth that still clung to Aimar's body, bathed the wounds, and dressed them with a soothing ointment. Elias did what she bade him do with childlike obedience, but at the first opportunity he slipped away, took out his shabby volume of Euclid, and composed himself comfortably in a chair by the fire. There, with the aid of sticks of different lengths, he demonstrated geometrical problems, to his own satisfaction, far into the night.

As for Mascarose, she moved not from

beside the bed; and when the first white dawn crept wistfully in through the narrow window Aimar opened his eyes and smiled into hers. Then she kissed him on the lips and slept.

XV

THERE SHALL BE LOVE-MAKING

CONTENTMENT is the best dressing for wounds, and when love steps into the sick-room physic is superfluous. Moreover, those were the times when, for some occult reason, wounds were wont to heal quickly. In the space of two days, then, the fever had abated and Aimar was able to move about with the assistance of Mascarose or Elias. He was still, however, pitifully weak, and the color showed but palely in his cheeks. His eyes, too, had taken on that appeal that comes with suffering, when confidence gives way to patience, and recklessness to resignation.

"There are three trials," the Monk of Béziers was wont to say, "that a man must undergo with fortitude if he be truly a man: injustice, matrimony, and death."

But the Monk, being vowed to celibacy, was, in this instance, surely at fault.

Aimar, at any rate, had suffered injustice and had borne it courageously; death at some future day was inevitably his lot, and matrimony he was in a fair way to contract. Notwithstanding, behold him happy!

The life led by Elias, the scholar, and his daughter was marked only by the absence of any regularity. Of fixed hours there were none. Like others of God's creatures who have no use for time and the flight of it, they ate when hunger hinted at eating, they slept when they were drowsy, they rose when they awakened, and, what perhaps was most reprehensible, they bathed for pleasure rather than from a sense of duty. Small wonder Christians crossed themselves at mention of their names, for was ever the devil's hand so clearly manifest?

The four walls and the roof that Elias had designed with his own mathematical

brain, and builded with his own hands, sufficed to shelter them from wind and rain. On cool nights they warmed themselves at an open fire, set in the centre of the room, for which a square hole in the roof served as chimney. When it was warm without, they scorned their beds and slept where they pleased; and if Elias walked with a stick, it was from old age and not from rheumatism.

Once in seven days they procured such food from the town as they could not pluck from the trees and vines or cultivate in their patch of garden. On these excursions Euclid, the donkey, who accompanied them, would return laden with a haunch of venison or a shoulder of lamb or a brace of pheasants, for they were not too proud to eat heartily, and nightingales' tongues or breast of peacock were delicacies for which they had acquired no taste. Barbarians, were they not?

As the Monk of Béziers had told Aimar, it had been true of Mascarose at one time

(and that time not so far distant) that she had threaded the forests clad only in her innocence; but it was equally true that now, having been forced through the Monk's reluctant explanations to taste, however slightly, of the tree of knowledge, she would have blushed like any other Eve to have remained unclad.

"Alas!" Elias had said on first beholding her skirts, "the days of the nymphs are past. We should not have forgotten it, you and I, my daughter; we must incline to conventions."

Two days later the inevitable sequel followed, and Mascarose brought back to the hut a hand-mirror.

"I must see if they hang well in the back," she explained gravely to the bewildered scholar.

She became remarkably apt at needlework, and it was she who pieced Aimar's torn garments together, so that they assumed some semblance of their former glory. And, oh, the bliss for him to lie

in the warm sunlight in front of the hut, wrapped in Elias's old brown cape, with her beside him, patching his mantle of scarlet and gold! Then, while she was intent on the course of her needle, he let his eyes drink in all of the beauty of her: the poise of her head, the tender line of her neck and breast, the graceful slimness of her arms, the infinite blackness of her hair. And she, looking up, would catch his gaze and interpret it, and her cheeks would blush crimson. Blushing — that was something love had taught her but lately.

The day arrived when Aimar's recovery was complete. He awoke on that morning rejoicing that a new day was at hand to be enjoyed, tingling with the zest of living, exulting in his strength. Outside it was scarcely dawn. A bird was singing back in the forest, crystal-clear — singing the glorious morning of life. The dew sparkled on the grass beneath his feet as he ran to the spot where the brook, pausing, formed a pool in order that man might

bathe. Through the trees, to the east, the sky glowed silver and rose, and overhead the stars were fading one by one.

He stripped and plunged joyfully into the cool water. It was good to be sound again — it was wonderful to live!

Dressing quickly, he went back to the cabin. In the door stood Mascarose, in white girdled with crimson and a crimson rose at her breast. She smiled at him coming, and called to him.

"A new day," she said. "Does the sun never tire of working miracles for us?"

"The sun," answered Aimar, "is brutal. It has murdered the stars. Farewell, stars — how reluctant you are to die. See, they tremble and grow pale, for they know their hour is come."

He put his arm about her, drew her to him, and kissed her lips.

"Do you love me?" he asked.

"You are my life," she answered.

"Then," said he, "on this day will I ask you to be my wife before God and man."

"I am ready," she said simply. "God is very good to me."

"Look," said Aimar, pointing, "— the sun."

As he spoke the first light, coming over the tree-tops, haloed them with gold, and the day was born.

They stood hand in hand like sun-worshippers waiting to look upon the face of their god, and all the centuries of true lovers, long dead but faithful in death, hovered about them, rejoicing, and brushed them with their wings.

Then, when the sun had marched in all majesty well up into the sky, they sought Elias. In this world permission to be happy has often to be obtained. They sought him in the cabin, they sought him in the garden, they sought him discreetly by the pool, thinking he might be bathing. It was characteristic of Elias, as of Mascarose, that he seldom announced his comings and goings; they were loath to pigeonhole their lives.

Finally they called his name in unison, and from the topmost branches of a tall chestnut, near by, came a preoccupied response. They looked up, shading their eyes from the sun with their hands. Precariously balanced astride of a slender limb, high overhead, sat the scholar. Forgotten was the staff, without which walking had been well-nigh impossible; forgotten was the stiffness of age and the fragility of old bones.

"God's mercy," exclaimed Aimar, "he has climbed the tree!"

"That," said Mascarose, "is unmistakable."

They held their breaths, fascinated; and Elias, intent on his work, vouchsafed them no more than a scant good morning.

In his hand was suspended a long cord, at the end of which swung a stone as large as an egg. Apparently it was his endeavor to find a vertical path, through the foliage beneath him, along which to lower the stone to the ground. That it was

proving difficult was evidenced by the manner in which he manœuvred the cord, now swinging it on the radius of his arms, now lowering it tentatively and cautiously, now twitching it up and down like an angler trying to seduce an unresponsive fish.

"Too many limbs," he muttered from time to time. "A plague on all these limbs!"

And then of a sudden, while they were watching him open-mouthed, the branches parted and the stone slipped through vertically to the ground. A cry of triumph echoed from above.

"*Voluntate forte omnia possumus*," said he.

"That is Latin," explained Mascarose. "He must be greatly moved."

When he had bitten off the string at a certain definite point, he let his end of it fall to the ground and commenced his descent, swinging himself down from limb to limb with amazing agility. But for his white beard, you might have thought

him some strange ape with prehensile feet. They breathed a sigh of relief when he landed, safe and uninjured save for a long rent in his hose and a leaf or two that still clung to his abundant beard.

"And now," he remarked gleefully, "if my calculation be correct, that string should measure just fourteen and one-half yards. I laid out the base of my triangle and sighted its adjacent angle last evening before sunset. Fourteen and one-half I made the height; and I desired to test my accuracy this morning. If I am correct in this I shall be able to determine the heights of mountains — yea, and who knows but, in time, the distances of the stars? The earth is my slave, and space has no mystery!"

The length of the string proved to be something less than fifteen yards — near enough to its calculated length to justify triumph.

The measurement being duly made, Aimar ventured to speak.

"Elias," he said, "we, also, have made discoveries, and for us, too, the world is a slave, and we have solved the mysteries of space and of time."

"How so?" demanded the scholar suspiciously. "Who taught you?"

"Love," answered Aimar.

Elias smiled his relief. His glance turned to Mascarose and a great tenderness filled his eyes. The hand that he reached out to hers trembled pitifully.

"May the Blessed Mary watch over you and keep you," he said, and kissed her on each cheek. Then he laid her hand gently in Aimar's.

"Prove to me, with God's help," he said wistfully, "that one and one make but one."

He brushed the tears from his eyes, picked up his string and his stone from the ground and, once more leaning heavily on his staff, moved slowly away into the shadows of the forest.

XVI

THE VILLAIN SHALL APPEAR TO RELENT

AIMAR'S forced departure from the castle of Gavarret had left no peace behind it. On many sides he was sorely missed; for he had sung of love and romance so frankly, and withal so reverently, that many who had locked away all gentle and tender passions out of their lives, had opened once more the treasuries of their hearts and were rejoiced to find that love still lay there fragrant.

Foremost among these to miss him were Ermengarda and Savaric. For them Aimar's had been the magician's touch to transmute the base metal of their hesitancy into the gold of love declared and unashamed. Wherefore he was remembered, morning and evening, in their prayers.

On the Lady Guillerma his influence, although less subtle, had been equally potent; for had he not fanned the last, dying embers of her heart into white, leaping flame? Ugo, the page, could have borne witness to her renaissance.

Stazailla and Biatritz, though of lower rank, had proved equally susceptible, and there were two captains of the guard that slept but poorly of nights for thinking of them.

And, finally, it was undeniable that he had touched the heart of the proud Alazais herself. Unconsciously she had allowed herself to come under his spell. Lives there ever a true and complete woman who, arm herself as she may, is proof against sentimental assault? Witness the spinsters that weep so luxuriously at marriages; witness the nervous interest of all females at betrothals; witness, finally, the host of vestals that desert their lamps to kindle a hearth-fire.

It is doubtful, and she would have de-

nied it sternly, that Alazais loved Aimar of Blaye. It is certain that she loved what his creed embodied and the teachings that he taught; but if she loved him at all she loved him as the desert traveller loves the well that gives him water. It should be borne in mind, however, that the traveller who is parched with thirst often confuses in his affection the water that he yearns for and the well that supplies it.

At all events there arose, shortly after Aimar's departure, a feeling of resentment and hostility toward the Count of Gavarret. It manifested itself in various ways, running murmuring through the corridors and hanging heavy but intangible in the very air of the halls. The Count could not but be aware of it, for he encountered it at every turn and in all his intercourse; it poisoned his feasts and it mocked at his fasts; he mistrusted the men that served him and the priest that confessed him. And, final humiliation, the Monk of Béziers, on whom he was wont to depend for

counsel, remained aloof from him as from an infectious plague.

So weighing matters uneasily in his mind, he reached the conclusion that, in his desire to be rid of Aimar, he had acted hastily and rashly. What was done could not be undone, but could matters not be mended?

It was with mending in view that he summoned to him the Monk of Béziers for intimate conversation. To do him justice he put the affair frankly enough before his counsellor. The Monk patiently heard him through. Then: "Do you ask my advice?" he demanded.

"It would so appear," said Gavarret.

"In that case," said the Monk, "have the boy back to the castle, and be thankful if he will come. In his place I would not. Your name has gained no lustre by your late deeds, my lord, and it befits you to make what reparation you may. They are coming to hate you heartily in the neighborhood, and, in truth, you are distasteful even to me who have known

you overwell these long years. Some day the devil and you will be warm friends in hell."

"Before that day comes," retorted Gavarret viciously, "some one will have cut your impudent tongue from your mouth."

"'Twill be some one, then, that cannot bear to hear the truth."

"It is like to be myself."

"Just so," said the Monk.

They quarrelled busily for several minutes before any reason entered into their discussion. At length Gavarret, allowing the Monk the last word, came out squarely.

"Show me a way by which I can have the troubadour return to the castle without putting myself in the wrong, and back he shall come. If he stay away much longer the women will overthrow the house of Gavarret before the year is out. Their mouths are fairly watering for him."

The Monk scratched his tonsured head.

"There is a way in which the thing could

be managed, and you will seem to be but testing the truth of Aimar's own words. Do you not remember that he claimed to have created love in your castle?"

"Yes," said the Count, "in my grim, mirthless castle. Those were the unctuous terms."

"Then," continued the Monk, "I suggest you have it publicly proclaimed that if, on an appointed day, a score of lovers appear at Gavarret before you and duly and earnestly request that Aimar be restored to the castle, you will pledge your word to receive him back with all honor. Thus, if ten men and ten maids have been united in love through his teaching, you graciously bow to overwhelming opinion and back he comes. If, on the contrary, there be not twenty to plead for him, why then you stand acquitted of all injustice and will have no enemies left but your conscience, which, methinks, you have trampled on too often to fear."

"Matfre, my friend," said Gavarret,

"you speak wisdom. You are a monk after my heart."

The Monk bowed.

"I see beyond my nose," he said, and withdrew.

The news spread as though it had been evil tidings, and before sunset no proclamation was necessary, for the public is never slow to learn matters that are private. It remained but for the heralds to announce the day appointed for the lovers' pilgrimage. Already people were counting names that might, beyond reason of a doubt, be included in the twenty petitioners, and at the Inn of the Golden Cross wagers were passed on the outcome and odds were given and taken on the eligibility of various ladies of high rank.

The Count of Gavarret generously allowed ten days in which all true lovers might decide whether they should present themselves. At first it seemed ample, but as the time drew nearer there occurred desertions from the ranks. Biatritz and

her captain, for example, quarrelled bitterly, and had not Alazais exerted all her efforts toward a reconciliation it is doubtful if the blonde waiting-maid would have listened to her lover's rude cajolings.

Alazais, though outwardly betraying utter indifference, did much discreet campaigning. She and the Monk of Béziers were seen often together, engaged in earnest conversation, plotting, planning, weighing possibilities. If the necessary twenty were not obtained it would be through no fault of theirs.

The lady of Gavarret addressed herself first to Ermengarda, in whom she possessed a devout worshipper and acolyte. She found her pliable.

"My sweet child," said Alazais to her, as casually as she was able, "what think you of this new scheme of my lord Peire? A trifle romantic in conception for our modern years, is it not?"

"Nay, my lady," answered Ermengarda. "It seems well and justly devised, and I

am exceeding glad that God has softened the heart of your lord and so opened his eyes that he is prepared to deal fairly with one who deserves honor rather than shame."

"You espouse him warmly," said Alazais, smiling. "Nine others such as you with nine lovers to plead with them and our troubadour will return to us. Shall you be glad?"

"Shall not all of us?" retorted the other quietly.

Alazais did not meet her eyes.

"It is only proper and right," she answered at length, "that a castle as important as Gavarret should have its troubadour. Our rank demands it, and if we have not one our neighbors will wonder. Besides, it is a pleasant luxury. Yes, I shall be glad."

"Savaric and I," said Ermengarda, with spirit, "plead not for a troubadour; we plead for Aimar of Blaye."

"He will be pleased at your devo-

tion," replied Alazais, kissing her forehead. "You are a true friend — a jewel rarer than emeralds in these false years."

So she dismissed her; and she was satisfied as to two of the twenty.

The Lady Guillerma proved not so facile. Moreover, now that she was aflame, she was inclined to scorn the bellows.

"To be sure," said she, "he sings well enough, except for his middle range, which is poor; and his verse, although lacking in wit, is pleasing. There are many, I grant you, that would have him back in the castle, but whether there be twenty — well, that we shall see."

"How feels Ugo, the page?" asked Alazais meaningly. "Doubtless he is hot for his master's return."

"Ugo, the page?" echoed Guillerma innocently. "What should I know of the feelings of Ugo, the page? Moreover, he is soon to be Ugo, the knight, for he is far too well-blooded to be but a menial. I have Gavarret's word for it."

"Ah," said Alazais, "it would seem that you do take some interest in Ugo."

"And what if I do?"

"He is very young."

"He has wit, then, beyond his years."

"And he is very small."

"I leave you the giants, my sweet."

"And his ears are amazing large."

"So, too, is his heart."

"Then you love him?"

"Why should I not?" answered Guillerma with a simper. "Is love to be evidenced only in you?"

"Nay," said Alazais, quickly, "I was not reproaching you. It would ill become a daughter to censure her mother. I was but amazed at the suddenness of your passion. It is not as if it were your first love."

"I have forgotten those that went before," protested Guillerma frankly, "and I ignore those that are like to come after. That is my nature and it simplifies life. You could pattern yourself on me with profit, my daughter."

"Oh, I," said Alazais coldly — "I am a wife and think not on such pastimes. I am far too old."

Guillerma, with reason, held that last spiteful. But, perceiving by now in what direction the catechising led, she refrained from criticism, revolving in her mind, rather, what gain there might be for her in complying with Alazais's wishes and numbering herself and Ugo among the twenty. Thus the lady of Gavarret was forced to break the silence that ensued.

"To what," said she, "do you lay the second blooming of your heart?"

"Perhaps," replied Guillerma cautiously, "perhaps my heart is a perennial."

Her daughter's laugh was impatient.

"Admit that Aimar had a hand in your rejuvenation."

"And what then?"

"Then if your heart contain an atom of gratitude, you will petition for his return."

Guillerma, for a moment, appeared to reflect.

"But for one thing," she objected, "it is possible that I should. It will, doubtless, be a day of great fêting, the day that Gavarret has appointed to listen to the pleading, and all of the women will make it an occasion to display their gowns and their jewels. I, your mother, should be shamed to appear wearing aught less than the finest. And I have naught to wear but sombre gowns and cheap trinkets. Now, had I, for example, your pear-shaped diamond that Gavarret brought back with him from the crusade —"

"Say no more," interrupted Alazais; "it is yours. And if there be aught in my wardrobe you have but to ask for it."

"Why, then," concluded Guillerma, "I feel it God's wish and my solemn duty to plead, with the twenty, for justice to Aimar."

XVII

THERE SHALL BE A WEDDING

NOW, the Monk of Béziers was greatly concerned in his mind as to Aimar's whereabouts. The guardsmen who had executed Gavarret's commands, and had driven and carried the troubadour down the road away from the castle, maintained a dogged silence. They had but obeyed their orders, they said; they had left him a mile from the outer gate and had returned. No, they swore there had been no murder. For aught they knew Aimar might be as far as Carcassonne by now — it depended but on the direction he had chosen to take.

Inquiries of Rogier at the Inn of the Golden Cross proved as empty. Mascarose he had seen, and her father, Elias;

but they had been accompanied only by their donkey. No one had seen Aimar, no one had heard of him. The Monk began to lose sleep and weight; but, rather than rejoice Gavarret's heart, he kept his worriment to himself.

It was more than possible, he thought, that the boy had sought out Mascarose; and so, inasmuch as he had found his way to her hut once before, he resolved soon to devote a morning to confirming his suspicion.

"A wounded lover," he reflected, "seeks his mistress before he does a physician." And with this axiom he strove to console himself.

There came to Gavarret, three days before Lover's Day (as it was now vulgarly designated), a lad from the village, bearing a sealed letter to be delivered into the hands of Matfre, the Monk of Béziers. The fact aroused no little wonder, for the arrival of a letter then was well-nigh as rare as the arrival of the king and, since

its significance might only be guessed, far more mysterious.

But the Monk, to whom written words had lost their awfulness, quietly retired to his chamber to read it privately and undisturbed. It ran thus:

To the most holy and revered Matfre, Monk of Béziers, at present God's instrument and exponent at the castle of Gavarret, greetings and all reverence.

As I have turned to you in my sorrows so do I now turn to you in my joy, knowing that your heart is great enough to minister unto both. I am as one famished, who has bread in his hand but will not eat until a blessing be said. I am as a sinner waiting the word of absolution. And yet I am neither famished nor a sinner, but am a bridegroom impatient to claim his bride.

In short, the favor I crave of you is that you will come to the house of Elias, the scholar, tomorrow at noon, there to unite in marriage Mascarose, daughter of Elias, and myself, your unworthy servant, and to sanction our union with God's blessing.

Do but this service for us and we shall pray that the Grace of God and the love of His Son descend on you and rest your soul here and hereafter.

So fail not, I do beseech you. My bliss is immeasurable, but I shall not be content until she

and I be one *in nomine Patris, et Filii et Spiritus Sancti.*

I salute you and inquire with concern after your well-being.

AIMAR OF BLAYE.

The Monk grunted not discontentedly.

"Not a word," he said, "of his body, but all of a volume about his heart. And 'tis I who must join the two innocents. What of the Lover's Day? He cares not or else he has not heard the proclamation. And what of Alazais and her scheming to get him back? All wasted effort. And what of me who must wed him to a reputed witch? — Ay, but what a witch, to be sure! One cannot blame the boy. I would marry her myself were I a man and not a monk. Love, love! He was ever prating of love, and now he experiences it. 'Tis the undoing of a man and the making of a woman. The man loses power, and the woman gains it; and oh, the power of women — of beautiful women! There should be a law requiring all female babies who possess the smallest trace of comeliness

to be drowned at birth. Then we should have no Eves, no Delilahs, no Helens of Troy, no Cleopatras, no Salomes. Of course, had we had no Eve — well, 'tis little use to speculate. One thing is certain: in any event I must keep the contents of this letter to myself."

Having reached, though circuitously, this happy conclusion, the good Monk took up his book of prayers and turned to those appropriate to the solemnization of matrimony. If they must be married, why, God's mercy, he would see to it that they were married well and thoroughly.

Meanwhile Aimar and Mascarose were happily ignorant of the confusion into which their letter had plunged the Monk. An hour, Aimar discovered, could hold more bliss than it could pain, and there were twenty-four blissful hours to every day. The world seemed so joyous that they wondered what Paradise could offer them superior, and, like all earnest lovers, they knew that no one before had ever found

the happiness that was theirs. Love, with its shining sword, had drawn a magic circle about them within which neither sorrow nor anger nor deceit nor any evil might penetrate to defile the fragrance of life and of all things young and fair.

When they had despatched the letter to the Monk of Béziers (Mascarose going with it to the village and delivering it into the hands of a boy more intelligent than his mates), they waited, breathless, for the morrow.

"You think Father Matfre will come?" asked Mascarose anxiously.

"If he does not," answered Aimar, "I have misread the man."

"He loves you dearly," she added.

"More than I merit."

"Nay," said she, "that privilege is mine alone."

Elias, intruding on them but little, occupied himself more madly than ever with his angles and his hypothenuses; but the light of the explorer no longer shone so

brightly in his eyes. "Subtract a daughter from a parent," he put it, "and you leave grief."

"But," answered Aimar, "if, instead of subtracting a daughter, you add a son, the result will be happiness."

"True," said Elias wistfully, "and no doubt I shall arrive at that result in time; old age was ever slow at addition."

The wedding day dawned clear as a child's eyes. A May morning in Provence! — words to conjure with, singing words. Lilting of sunlight, cool shadows that entice; subtle south wind, born of the sea and fathered by the sun; crystal trembling of unquiet water, filled with the blue of a low-lying sky; riot of roses; impatient murmur of bees, and the lark singing eternal morning.

Mascarose was in the forest, alone, praying; and purer prayers than hers have never reached heaven. Shortly before noon she came to Aimar. He was blinded

by the beauty of her. She was all in white, having discarded even the crimson girdle that had circled her waist; but color glowed in her cheeks and lips, and the light in her eyes was as though she had walked with God.

Aimar bent and broke a red rose from its branch and placed it at her breast.

"My bridal gift," he said. "It has been ever the symbol of you. Its very essence is yours."

They were compelled to disturb Elias in the midst of his calculations to remind him that it was their wedding day and nearly noon. Greatly humiliated at his forgetfulness, he left his work abruptly, an angle only half computed, and joined them where they waited in the clearing.

There the three of them sat, silent, watching the sun march up the sky.

Presently they heard a crackling of branches and the sound of feet stumbling over roots and stones, followed by a deep-voiced hallo. They answered eagerly and

received in reply a heartfelt: "God be praised!" and the Monk of Béziers, hot and panting, emerged beside them out of the forest. Wiping the sweat from his face with his sleeve, he lowered his robe, which he had girded up to his knees. Then, with a quiet twinkle in his little round eyes, he addressed them sternly.

"I see," he said, "that the bridegroom and the bride sit peacefully in the shade adding up their bliss, while the priest who is to unite them waters the trackless forest with his sweat. The selfishness of the young is unparalleled, is it not, venerable Elias?"

They soothed and cajoled him and brought him a cup of wine to quench a thirst that he claimed could not be matched this side of perdition. Then, when he was more at peace with himself and the world, he explained to them how matters lay at the castle.

"And so," he concluded, "if Lover's Day prove as popular as it is like to be,

why all of Gavarret will have no rest until Aimar be back, thumping his lute and singing his heart out. What say you to that, Aimar?"

"I say," he answered gravely, "that I have done with Gavarret for all time. I have found, outside its walls, my life and love."

"And what of your art?" asked the Monk.

Aimar turned to Mascarose and took her hand.

"My songs," he said, gazing into her eyes, "shall hereafter be as incense burned before a single shrine."

"Aptly and prettily put," exclaimed the Monk indignantly; "you will be for haloing her soon. What say you to this, Mascarose?"

The girl smiled quietly.

"Aimar's will is mine," she answered, "and his wish is as a command to me."

"You talk like the Book of Ruth," said the Monk in disgust. "What say you,

Elias? I can get no reason out of these two."

The scholar, who had been drawing parallel lines on the ground with the point of his staff, roused himself from his abstraction.

"Why," said he, "I naturally prefer that my daughter's husband should have some settled occupation. Song-singing to no one but the birds does not clothe nor feed nor house. At the castle, I infer, he would be in line for rich rewards."

"I should prefer to attach myself to any castle other than that of Gavarret," declared Aimar firmly. "But the question is not pressing; indeed it may very well occur that there be not found twenty to plead for me on this Lover's Day of yours. And now, Father Matfre, it is past noon and, as there is naught to be gained by further discussion, I beseech you to marry us forthwith."

The Monk threw up his hands and led the way to the foot of a huge oak. He

stood with his back to it, and Aimar and Mascarose knelt before him, with Elias behind them, swaying on his staff. There, with the oak-tree for their altar and its twisted branches their vaulted roof, and, for their incense, the warm fragrance of the ground, he married them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. And from all sides of the forest rose the antiphonal chanting of the birds.

XVIII

THE GREAT LADY SHALL AID THE HERO

ON the eve of Lover's Day, Alazais sat with the Monk of Béziers counting up names on her fingers. She had noted of late that the Monk lacked the enthusiasm which had formerly marked his attitude, and which had made of him her stanchest lieutenant in the difficult task of flushing twenty love-birds. In truth his indifference as to the results of Lover's Day gave her great cause for wonder. She questioned him, taunting him with being faint-hearted — a fair-weather friend — but his only reply was: "The wise babe ceases crying when he learns that he cannot get his fingers on the moon." This was, to say the least, enigmatic.

Alazais had not confined her efforts to the castle, for there were many in the vil-

lage who had heard Aimar sing, and though they were of lesser rank she was mediæval enough to believe that hearts beat — nay, that sometimes they throb — in the breasts even of the poor and humble. The reward of her open-mindedness lay in the success that she encountered.

Now the lady of a castle, although she might not make a sortie into the village unattended, to shop, or even to assist at mass, could, nevertheless, find opportunities to converse with those villagers of her own sex who had occasion to come to the castle. Moreover, the two waiting-women, Stazailla and Biatritz, both of them now firmly pledged to the cause, served as excellent emissaries. They had their instructions to keep their ears and their eyes open in the kitchens and the serving-halls, and should Aimar's name be mentioned in their hearing they were to report at once to their mistress.

Thus it happened that on the eve of Lover's Day, when Alazais was lamenting

to the Monk that there were as yet but fourteen lovers on whom she could count, there came a timid rap at the door and there entered the dark-haired Stazailla.

"My lady," she said, "they are quarrelling in the kitchen."

"Is that in any way remarkable?" put in the Monk. "Our modern servant—'

"Peace!" interrupted Alazais. "Let the girl speak. Why do they quarrel in the kitchen, Stazailla?"

"'Tis about Aimar of Blaye," replied the girl tentatively.

"Ah," said Alazais, "you may proceed."

"There was one," continued Stazailla, "a maid in the scullery, an Italian from Padua they say, who repeated many falsehoods concerning him."

"And how," queried the Monk, "did you know them for falsehoods?"

"Because she is an Italian," explained Stazailla simply.

"And can no good come out of Italy?"

"I know not what they do in Italy, Father Matfre; only I do know that in France she lies."

"What did she say of Aimar?" asked Alazais.

"She said he was a chicken-hearted boy pretending to be a man, but fit only for a nunnery."

"Ha!" exclaimed the Monk, "Aimar in a convent! There would be an unquiet lot of nuns, I warrant!"

"And then what?" demanded the Countess impatiently.

"And then," said Stazailla, "there was a girl who had come from the village with fruit; and she heard the indignity put on the name of Aimar and became vexed. So she answered the Italian sharply, and the Italian replied most obscenely; and they quarrelled and came to blows; and the girl from the village loosened one of the Italian's teeth and caused her to bite her tongue until it bled. And, to my mind, it would have been fitting had she bitten it

clear off; for no tongue is better than a lying one."

"If thine eye offend thee," murmured the Monk, "pluck it out."

"Where," asked Alazais, "is the girl from the village? If she has not gone bring her to me at once."

"Nay," said Stazailla shrewdly, "she is not gone; for when I saw in which quarter lay the wind with her, and how valiantly she championed Aimar of Blaye, I bade her stay until I should report to you."

"You did well," commended Alazais. "Go fetch her."

"A new recruit?" suggested the Monk, when Stazailla had withdrawn.

The lady of Gavarret shrugged her shoulders.

"Why not? There can be love in the kitchen as well as in the castle."

Stazailla returned presently, bringing with her by the hand a hearty, red-cheeked girl whose black eyes still sparkled with the glint of battle triumphant.

"This," explained Stazailla, "is Guida."

Guida! Do you remember Guida, who wept at Aimar's first song at the Inn of the Golden Cross? Poor, honest Guida, who had given her heart too often to be counted honest.

She courtesied low to the lady of Gavarret, then stood patiently, waiting to be addressed.

"Guida," said Alazais kindly, "I am informed that you have but now led a crusade in the cause of truth."

"My lady," answered the girl, "I would fight in any cause were it under the banner of Aimar of Blaye. I lay no claim to unusual virtue, but I would defend him from a lie, or if need be, with a lie."

"There," put in the Monk, "will you note the light that throws on morality in general? A man sins for himself; a woman for another. Often have I wondered why the angels should all be males!"

"Set that down in your *Breviary of Love*,"

recommended Alazais, and continued questioning the girl.

"Then you know Aimar of Blaye — you have conversed with him, you have heard him sing?"

"Yes, my lady. Before ever he came to the castle; at the Inn of the Golden Cross."

"Ah, and of what did he sing?"

"Of love, my lady, and his love."

"And you admired the singing?"

"It awoke that in my heart which I had thought strangled at birth, and it brought the tears to eyes that had been dry for far too many years, my lady."

"Poor child," said Alazais softly. "And you loved him?"

"It was not for me to love him. We other women dare not love; we may but worship and keep silent and pray to our Mary — I mean the Madeleine."

"And when Aimar had left for the castle, and you saw him no more — what then?"

"Why, then, he had put into my heart so much of his purity that my body seemed doubly polluted in my own eyes, and I resolved that it should suffer no further stain. So I prayed all through the darkness of a night, and in the morning I confessed to a priest and received absolution. He told me of the rejoicing that was in heaven over a sheep that had been lost and found again, and I asked him if it was not hard for a sheep that had once wandered to stay ever after close to the fold. You see I doubted my strength. But he reassured me and helped me when I needed help most badly, and seven days ago he read the mass at my marriage."

"A good priest and a good man," said the Monk.

"And you are happy?" asked Alazais.

"I am not happy, but I am content; and, oh, the peace of it all! It is like sleep after fever. I had not known how tired I was of sinning. My life had been like a garden of flame-colored flowers with not a

cool, white one among them, and all of us need that white flower in our lives. But now it is different. My husband knows what I have been and despises me not for it; he knows what I am trying to be and loves me for it. All this, my lady, I owe to Aimar of Blaye, and I have nothing in my power with which to repay him."

"Not so," objected Alazais, "for you can at least aid him by pleading for his return to-morrow — on Lover's Day."

Guida hesitated.

"My lady," she said slowly, "I wonder, does he wish to return? Was he made for walls and a roof and not, rather, for wide, open spaces where one can see God?"

"Perhaps he is a fitter judge of that than you or I," answered the lady of Gavarret shortly. "We can but open the door for him. It is for him to say if he will enter. May we count on you to plead for him?"

"You may," said Guida.

"And him you have married?"

"He will do as I ask," answered the girl.

"A modern husband," commented the Monk; but Alazais gave no heed and murmured to herself: "Sixteen."

XIX

THERE SHALL BE A DAY FOR LOVERS

PEIRE of Gavarret had of late been enjoying sounder sleep; for to him had come that quietude of mind that is the reward either of a clear conscience or of none at all. The unhappy ones are those who regret their sins but persist in sinning. The Count, however, being thoroughly convinced that an upright life was a symbol of moral and physical cowardice, wrought his evil with the enthusiasm of a strong man.

"Peire of Gavarret," the Monk had said, "lives for the satisfaction only of Peire of Gavarret, and for the dissatisfaction of every one else."

In any case Gavarret found no end of amusement in contemplating the approach

of Lover's Day. He witnessed with a smile his lady's discreet manœuvrings about the castle in search of the twenty and, since he cared not two straws whether she succeeded or failed, his appetite was excellent and his humor nearer to cheerfulness than it had been for many a year.

Accordingly, the morning of Lover's Day found him the one composed person in the castle. When he awoke, Alazais was already up and away. Word had been brought her that her mother, Guillerma, suffering severely from an aching tooth, felt herself unable to rise from her bed.

"An aching tooth!" cried Alazais angrily. "Has she, then, so many? Say rather *the* aching tooth."

But she slipped noiselessly from the side of her sleeping lord and went to remonstrate and cajole. The gift of an emerald ring set with diamonds proved to have soothing influences on the toothache. Guillerma, well knowing the value at which

they were held, was selling her services dearly.

It thus followed that Gavarret and his wife dressed for the festival day in different quarters, and met not until the hour arrived when they were to take their places side by side on the double throne erected for their use in the tournament field. Memorable spot — day not to be forgotten! The Lady Alazais shuddered at thought of it and saw in her mind once again the blood of Marlatz flowing red from his shoulder, staining the grass; saw him beating with his spear on the shield of war; saw him raise his arm to deal the blow that stretched Gavarret a quivering mass on the ground. Before her, indeed, stood the same gallery for the spectators, and the same merry crowd was pushing its way down the path to reach it. The air was as tense, the breeze as warm and languid, and the sky had lost none of its blue.

Ah, there was one difference. She had half expected to see the two hundred armed

knights drawn up in lines, a hundred at either end of the field. They, at least, were now absent, and with them were gone the significant clanking of steel and the impatient treading of their horses' hoofs.

Unconsciously she sighed aloud her relief; so that Gavarret, pacing beside her in all his dark dignity, turned inquiring eyes upon her.

"You are sad," he remarked; "I heard you sigh. Do you fear lest there come not twenty to plead for Aimar to-day?"

Alazais forced a smile.

"As to that," she replied, "I am indifferent. I was but concerned about my mother's tooth. She tells me she is suffering."

"'Twas an exceeding heartfelt sigh, then, if it was merely for a mother's tooth," said Gavarret placidly.

"It is her last," she answered him with perfect gravity.

By now they were arrived at the gallery and into the gaze of a thousand curious

eyes. There was scarcely one among the spectators who knew not something of the significance of this Lover's Day, who had not heard of Alazais's efforts toward its success; and that vast, ever-fickle, non-reasoning thing known as the heart of the people was with her. You could hear it beating as she took her seat beside her lord in the front of the gallery.

"She is wonderful," whispered a young girl in the crowd to a companion. "She should have been a king's wife. See the set of her head on her neck; it was made to bear a crown."

"Nay," answered her neighbor, manlike, "she is overcold for my taste. She has no heart."

"No heart!" echoed the girl scornfully. "'Tis you that have no eyes."

Hers was the general opinion.

The lady of Gavarret wore on that day neither brilliant colors nor conspicuous jewels. She had dressed herself with much the same emotions she had felt when she

had prepared to go to Gavarret a white, child-eyed bride. Her girdle was embroidered with pearls, and there were pearls woven in the gold of her hair. Her cool hands were ringless; no necklace bound her throat. Her long gown fell in folds of that blue which later artists gave to the robes of the Madonna — deeper than that of the sky, more restful than that of a southern sea — and in the weave of it ran threads of silver, forming designs as indistinct as figures in a dream. Blue, silver, and pearls — colors of the morning of life rather than of the noon. Can you, from that, read a fluttering page of her heart?

She was paled by Gavarret beside her, all black and azure and gold, splendid as some rapacious Goth who has sacked for his attire a Roman sunset.

They sat impassively, to all appearances a lord and his devoted lady; but he watched her carefully, studying and interpreting, after his own fashion, her least movement. And she was counting her heart-beats up

to twenty, pausing at that number only to begin anew. Sixteen she had pledged; surely four others would be forthcoming.

The bell in the chapel rang high noon. Before its echo had faded and died in the valley it was answered by a hoarse calling of trumpets. A herald, clad in white and silver, read the stilted proclamation, which dwelt chiefly on the virtues of Peire of Gavarret and but little on whatever of good there was in Aimar of Blaye. Gavarret appeared neither displeased nor surprised at this recital of his qualities, for, as the Monk of Béziers knew, he had been the author of his own eulogy the day previous. Magnanimous, he was termed, and chivalrous; loyal and revered; merciful and compassionate and overflowing with the milk of human kindness.

"It is not only hyperbolic," the Monk had criticised, "but it is tautological. It is like a man who speaks to another in a strange language, and thinks to make him

understand if he can but shout loud enough. Lung-power never turned a wheel."

"Then," Gavarret had answered, "why not cease talking?"

In truth, as the adjectives rolled smoothly from the lips of the herald, there were not a few who exchanged covert smiles, and there were some, more daring, who winked openly and brazenly. Alazais, however, was not of these; but she leaned close to her lord and whispered sweetly in his ear. "Why, my lord," she asked, "have you kept such virtues as these concealed from me, your wife?"

His reply was irreverent.

Now the way by which the pilgrim lovers were to come was a winding path of grass that left the main road just short of the castle's outer gate and wandered, freely and pleasantly, in a half-circle around the walls until it reached one end of the open field. There, chastened by its abrupt conspicuousness, its course straightened, and it skirted the face of the gallery as

though drawn by rule. Having proven, where necessary, its capacity for regularity, it then plunged recklessly into the shadows of the trees and undergrowth at the far end of the field and sported merrily away through the forest until, with the aid of a flight of rough stone steps, it clambered up the cliff again to the main road, behind the castle, and not far from the boundary line of Gavarret's estate.

It was so narrow that two strangers might not walk abreast on it without discomfort; but there were to be no strangers treading it on Lover's Day.

All eyes were now fixed on this shaded approach, straining to catch the first glimpse of moving color through the trees — the glow of a scarlet mantle or the flash of a white skirt. Expectancy gripped them all so close that there was no sound save when the leaves stirred restlessly on their wind-rocked branches; and then from half a thousand throats came a long-drawn sigh of pleasure as Savaric and Ermengarda

emerged, hand in hand, into the open field.

The sun caught them full, flashing gayly on the one jewel that she wore — a small diamond pinned at her breast. But her two eyes were as bright as any diamond. Slim and straight and her head high, her lover led her across the grass. Those who were fortunate enough to be close to them as they passed perceived that love had lent to her a wonderful, wistful beauty and to him a gentle pride that shone bravely in his eyes. A cry of approval and of admiration rose up over the field; but there were some who were breathless with the wonder of it.

They paid their homage to Gavarret and his lady, Savaric going on one knee, Ermengarda courtesying to the ground. Then they stood, waiting. Gavarret regarded them with a smile, not unkindly.

"According to the prescribed formality," he said, "we must demand of you your names and titles, and the reason for your

appearance here before us. All of these, however, being known to us in this instance, we greet you first as our friends before addressing you as our followers. Savaric of Rodez, and Ermengarda, our kinswoman, we rejoice that you are with us, and we extend to you the assurance of our highest regard. We listen with concern to whatever you may have to say."

"My lord of Gavarret," replied Savaric, "we are come to plead for one who is absent, and in whose absence lies our grief, just as in his presence lay our happiness. He it was who opened the book of our hearts, and taught our dim eyes to read the love that was written therein. Humbly, and withal proudly, we plead for the return of Aimar of Blaye."

Gavarret waited, patient, while the crowd cheered lusty approval. When at length he obtained silence, he said: "We have heard you with pleasure, and your names shall be duly inscribed at the head of the

list of petitioners by our friend and counsellor, the Monk of Béziers."

He dismissed them graciously, and they passed on to take places among the spectators.

"Two," counted Alazais to herself while Gavarret smiled in his beard.

Followed Guillerma and Ugo, the page soon to be dubbed knight; she radiant in the silks and jewels of her daughter, prancing like an old war-horse in new trappings; he, dimmed to insignificance beside her, his head scarce level with her shoulder. The audible tittering that greeted their appearance she received with a snort and a toss of careful curls, and he, with a fiery blush that spread over his face to settle definitely in his large ears. She led him firmly to the throne and they saluted.

"Your names and titles?" demanded Gavarret gravely.

The boy, not having foreseen the question, hesitated, and Guillerma answered in his stead.

"He is Ugo," she said indignantly. "You should know him well enough by now, for he has filled your bath every evening these last two years. As for me, if you ask me, why, I am your wife's mother."

"Nay," soothed Gavarret, "we asked not to vex you, but because it is the formality. Shall we inscribe your names in behalf of Aimar of Blaye? Are you true lovers eagerly desiring his return?"

"We are lovers in all truth," answered Guillerma quickly. "I am to Ugo as the moon and he is my star. I am the stone and he is the flint —"

"Good," interrupted Gavarret, amused; "we are convinced. Put down their names, Father Matfre, in letters of flame."

They passed on. Ugo, it was noted, had spoken no word, but they took his blushes for good faith.

"Four," whispered Alazais to herself.

Followed Biatritz, the maid-in-waiting, and her captain of the guards. She moved modestly and gracefully, her hand resting

white and timid on the bend of his arm. Their appearance reversed that of their predecessors, for the soldier was a very giant, deep-chested and heavy-shouldered and handsome as Mars in his shining mail; and Biatritz was exquisitely young — blond and white and cool.

Their pleading was simple and from the heart; and the Monk of Béziers added their names to his list with a benediction on them.

"Six," said Alazais to herself, when they had gone.

Followed Stazailla and the lover of her choice; followed Stazailla, fickle-hearted as Biatritz was faithful, dark as Biatritz was blond — a girl to madden a lover and rejoice in his madness.

Said the Monk of Béziers: "She is the kind that sinks ships and burns the towers of Ilium. She is of Helen's breed and sister to Cleopatra of Egypt."

"Eight," counted Alazais, on the fingers of her two hands.

Followed then, rapidly, four more couples: a little maid of the pantries, frail and white — all of her life-weary save her eyes, which held a light warmer than any reflection of kitchen fire; then a strapping girl from the village, full-breasted and strong, and graceful with the grace that strength brings — a Demeter of the soil whose hair had caught and held the gold of sun-kissed wheat. With her came a slim lad, walking with the stoop that arrives over-early to the scholar. He declared himself a student at Montpellier.

"May your offspring have their father's head on their mother's shoulders!" exclaimed the Monk of Béziers, as he wrote their names on the list.

"Twelve," murmured Alazais.

There came, too, a woman closely veiled whom Alazais knew for her cousin Flamenca, a daughter of Guillerma's sister. With her was a Lord Guilhem of Nevers in full armor and his visor down. They were running away to be married and had

kept their horses tethered to a tree by the main road.

"Once only," explained Flamenca, "have I heard your Aimar sing; but we are so happy we cannot bear that another should suffer through lack of lovers to plead for him."

"Hurry, my love," said Lord Guilhem through his helmet, "the priest will be waiting for us."

But Flamenca turned to Alazais.

"Your blessing, cousin," she begged.

"It is yours, cousin," answered the lady of Gavarret abstractedly; and she whispered to herself: "Fourteen!"

Followed two that came more slowly, their step uncertain beneath the weight of their years. Her hair was white that had once been golden, and her eyes were dim with the tears that joy and sorrow had brought her, each in its turn. They came hand in hand, even as they had come through life. Wonderfully fair she still seemed to him and he — why, he was just

the youth who loved her and whom she loved.

"A thousand ages, in their sight, are as an evening," paraphrased the Monk of Béziers.

The old man gave their names in a voice that trembled through the silence.

"Why are you two come here?" demanded Gavarret brusquely. "This is no place and no day for gray hairs."

"Nay, my lord," answered the woman, "judge not so hastily. Our years but add to our credentials; for is it not more wonderful to have loved for a lifetime than for a short month? We come with no title save that of lovers."

"Write them down, then," said Gavarret; but the Monk already had them on the list.

"Sixteen," breathed Alazais.

Followed then Guida, once of the taverns, now of the hearth, and her husband, an honest man who tended sheep in the pasture-lands of the valley. On her Gavarret bent stern brows.

"I have had reports of you," he said grimly. "You, at least, have known love before ever Aimar of Blaye taught it you."

"Not so, my lord," she answered him evenly. "I had known but passion; and passion and love are as different as scarlet and green."

"It requires scarlet to make green," objected the Count.

"Yes; but it requires not green to make scarlet," she replied. "I learned for myself the love of passion. It needed Aimar of Blaye to teach me the passion of love."

"I am glad," sneered the Count, "that you are lost to the devil. Put them down, Father Matfre; I rejoice in the miracle."

"I have," said the Monk; "and be sure, my lord, that there is rejoicing in heaven as well as on earth."

"Eighteen," counted Alazais happily, and turned to look for the last two.

But now there came a delay. From the wooded path no sign of movement — no flashing of color through the trees, no soft tread of lovers' feet. Suspense made itself audible, running low-voiced through the crowd, agitating it like a shudder. To Alazais the minutes dragged by like hours of pain. Already her ears caught the impatient shifting of feet, the adjusting of cloaks and of belts, all the sounds that signify a crowd's restlessness. Gavarret, smiling, stroked his black beard with deliberate fingers.

The air freshened and cooled; the sun was nearing the tops of the gray hills, and the breeze grew vital with a first hint of evening. The shade cast by the gallery deepened; beyond it the shadows of the banners, high overhead, writhed spasmodically on the grass.

The Monk regarded Alazais with invisible eyebrows raised in question. She made no movement, but her teeth were set hard on her lower lip. Gavarret, one

amused eye on his lady, was now talking easily of the prospects for a good vintage and the earliness of the spring wheat.

It was Alazais herself who was the first to glimpse a flash of crimson moving through the leaves by the path. She indicated it to the Monk with trembling finger. Immediately all heads were turned; whispering ceased and then swelled into something akin to a cheer. A long-drawn "ah" rippled and broke across the field.

A man and a girl stepped lightly, hand in hand, out into the open. As yet the distance was so great that their faces were indistinct, but they both were slim, and so lightly they trod that it was as though their bodies held no weight. They came across the slanting sun, and she was in white, girdled with crimson, and a crimson rose was at her breast. And her lips were redder than the rose.

Alazais looked, rubbed her eyes, and looked again; and a cry came from her lips. The Monk jumped to his feet, let-

ting his list fall unheeded to the ground, and with him all who were in the gallery, straining, pushing, climbing over the seats. A shout arose like the breaking of a storm; and it rocked the valley of Gavarret. Then silence.

They advanced quietly, evenly — Aimar and Mascarose, his wife; he keeping his eyes ahead of him, fixed in the distance where blue-green cypresses embroidered the line of the sky, and she with eyes ever turned to his. There was about them a light that was neither of sea nor of land.

Pausing in front of the throne, they saluted gravely. Gavarret knew not whether to be vexed or amused; but there showed no amusement in the face of Alazais. Then Aimar spoke:

"I am Aimar of Blaye and this is Mascarose, my wife. We are come to plead for Aimar of Blaye — not for his return, for we desire it not; but we plead that the memory of him and of his days at Gavarret be held not unkindly in the hearts

of those for whom he sang. We plead that he be remembered as one whose highest desire was to open blind eyes that they might behold the light of love, to unseal dumb lips that they might repeat love's creed, and to arouse dead hearts that they might beat to love's song. My lord, for this are we come to plead."

Gavarret spoke not, but the Monk of Béziers held out supplicating arms.

"Aimar, Aimar!" he cried, "remain with us yet a while. Your work here is not done."

"Time shall complete it," answered the troubadour; "I can do no more."

"Nay," pleaded the Monk, "we have tasted of the cup of life and found it sweet, and now you would dash it from our lips before our thirst be satisfied. You have woven your song into the sombre tapestries of our days even as a shining thread of silver. We need you, Aimar, we need you sorely. Without you we are children groping in the darkness. Take pity on our

helplessness and remain with us here at Gavarret!"

An eager murmur of assent came from the gallery.

"Stay with us, Aimar of Blaye!" they cried.

As he listened his eyes shone with a great happiness.

"Now," he answered, "am I more than repaid; for you prove to me that what seed I have sowed has fallen on good ground. But you need me no longer: it is for you alone to reap love's harvest, for you alone to gather the golden sheaves of contentment. Before you stretch years of radiant noons and tranquil, starlit evenings. Love has opened to you the doors of Light, and you shall no longer be as children groping in the darkness. I, too, am standing on the threshold, and my eyes are dazzled by the wonderful glory beyond. Farewell — I go into the sun."

They went as they had come, hand in hand, following the narrow path into the

woods at the far end of the field. No one stirred, and no one spoke, but all watched them wistfully, and many eyes held tears. A last flash of crimson and gold through the tree-shadows, and they were gone.

Alazais shivered, drew her cloak about her and covered her eyes with her hood; but she could not hide the dead whiteness of her face, nor the marks, cruelly red, that her teeth had made in her lip.

Still they waited, in silence, as for a sign.

Long shadows stretched their uncouth lengths on the field, and the distant hills turned to amethyst opposite the setting sun.

And then, presently, from the road far above on the cliff, came, crystal and silver, the voice of Aimar singing the love of life and the life of love.

With it, on the breeze, was borne the fragrance of roses.

XX

THERE SHALL BE A CONCLUSION DISTASTEFUL TO MANY

DARKNESS of night, moonless and starless; low-lying storm-clouds sweeping up the valley; lonely owls hooting, mad circling of dismal bats; and two hundred armed men riding silently up the winding road to Gavarret.

Six guardsmen of the outer gate died with a strangled whimper, and, before the chapel bell rocked the night silence with frenzied alarm, two hundred men of Marlatz, Baron of Arc, were ranging the halls of the castle.

Then lights sprang up too late, and red torches flickered on steel and blood and the writhings of dying men. They fought down long, echoing corridors where there

was scarce the width to swing a sword; they fought madly in the semi-darkness of stairways, slipping in their own blood; they fought massed in the halls, swaying like a storm-tossed forest; and they fought grimly, man to man, in silent corners where death comes the hardest.

Marlatz, a bare sword in either hand, came upon Peire of Gavarret in his room. By the bed crouched Alazais, white as the sheet around her. In the corner the flame of a candle shivered in the draught.

There was no word spoken. Marlatz handed the Count one of the two swords, and they fought in silence around the bed and across it.

From the great hall came a shouting and crying. A silken tapestry on the wall broke into flames, fired by a torch. Some dead hand had been careless. In a minute the room was walled and roofed with angry, leaping red; and grim smoke clouds, flame-shot, groped evilly down from the ceiling.

Those that still lived struggled blindly through the doors. The dying were left with the dead.

There were some that noticed a fighting Monk, his robe belted up to his thighs. It was he who had led the last hopeless rally of the men of Gavarret in the hall, his huge, brown bulk conspicuous in the van. Where his red sword flashed, the best went down, and he dealt death with a *Requiescat in pace*. He was the last to leave the burning hall on his feet; but in his arms he bore the slim body of Savaric of Rodez.

Reaching the corridor, the Monk hesitated with his burden, listening to the sound of fighting dying down in the distance. He turned at a touch on his sleeve.

"Ermengarda!" he cried. "You should not be here; 'tis no place for you."

She regarded him with brave eyes.

"My place is by my lord," she answered quietly, and took the torn, wounded body from his shoulder.

"He lives — he is not dead," whispered the Monk. "He will not die."

"He shall not die," she said, and bore him away with slender arms that did not falter.

"God keep you both!" prayed the Monk, wiping his sword on the sleeve of his gown.

In the courtyard the fighting still persisted. It was dismal work. Men came reeling to the doors, clutching each other's throats, blind with the smoke that swept out with them. Once in the open, the night air cooled their heads, and their hands dropped wearily to their sides as they joined the huddled crowd by the gate.

From the lower windows of the hall-tower, flames, like red, storm-lashed banners, cast a ghastly leaping light on the strained faces of silent men leaning, horror-stricken, on their naked swords.

Threatening thunder rolled and echoed down in the valley, mingling with the dull

roar of the fire. The storm-clouds raced overhead.

The crowd in the court edged back, inch by inch, from the burning wall, the heat blistering their faces. And then there came a cry from those in front, and a mad stampede through the outer gate. The wall of the tower shivered, bellied out in the middle like a sail catching a squall, and fell crashing to the ground. The flames, released, leaped greedily upward to the roof.

And now the interior was revealed, a fire-racked hell, gutted, save for the topmost floor, which still hung supported on its three remaining walls. It was as though the curtain had been raised on some monstrous, unholy stage.

They who were watching below saw enacted on that stage grim tragedy. They saw through the smoke and fire two men fighting around and across a bed. They saw, kneeling by the bed, a woman in white, her face hidden in her shining hair.

What they did not see was the storm

whirling up the valley and white lightning cleaving the sky above them. Nor did they hear the muttering thunder, ever nearer and louder.

They saw, and trembled at the seeing, the sword of Marlatz of Arc driven fair through the breast of his enemy. They saw Gavarret's arms go up over his head, his fingers clutching at empty air. They saw him crumple at the knees, reel backward toward them and, against the glow of the fire, they saw a dark body fall, rolling over and over in space. Then, presently, they heard a mass of dead clay fall on the stone paving of the court.

At that instant, with a mad din of thunder, the lightning split the clouds and the flood fell. They bent beneath it, shivering.

The Monk of Béziers stood in the outer court.

"Surely," he whispered, "this is the hand of God. Gavarret is dead, and better men than he; but there are two, at

least, for whom his death will mean life."

His gaze followed his thought and, straining his eyes far above him near the castle's roof, he beheld through the smoke and the hissing caldron of flame a man and a woman.

They stood erect: he huge, dark, indomitable; she fearless, proud, and pale as a lily. And they watched the battling of fire and water — the battling of Titans on the outcome of which their lives rested.

Slowly, reluctantly the flames lost headway, hesitated, and, hissing angrily, subsided. The rain beat down on them, persistent, relentless. The red glow died in the courtyard, and the face of the tower stood gaunt and haggard, a black skeleton.

The crowd waited in silence. From time to time the thunder still muttered in the distance, and the rain pattered softly and incessantly on the stone pavement.

Then peace came to brood over the carnage of war.

When all was quiet the Monk of Béziers went to his knees.

"Lord God," he cried, "Thy will is done! Thou hast cleansed us with fire and with sword. Thou hast wrought Thy vengeance on Thine enemies, and Thou hast shown mercy to those who love Thee and strive to walk in Thy ways. Give unto us a sign, we beseech Thee, that we may know that Thy wrath is appeased; for it is dark, and we tremble and are sore afraid. Cast out the night from our failing hearts, and fill our breasts with the dawn of hope."

The lips of them kneeling around him breathed a trembling Amen.

While they waited, the murmur of the rain slackened and ceased, the rim of dawn touched the east with silver, and far down in the garden a lark commenced to sing the morning.